



NOVEL

4

7th TIME LOOP

The Villainess Enjoys a Carefree Life
Married to Her Worst Enemy!

Written by Touko Amekawa ♦ Illustrated by Wan☆Hachipisu



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*"Be my wife. I don't
want anything more
than that right now."*

"Ngh..."

"If it's still too early to swim, why not amuse ourselves this way?"

With his arms ringed around Risha's waist, Arnold squinted at her.

"You look awfully pleased with yourself."

"I am. I'm quite satisfied at having pranked you, Your Highness."



*"Please maintain a
steady pace for me."*

"I know."





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Seven Seas Entertainment

7TH TIME LOOP: THE VILLAINESS ENJOYS A CAREFREE LIFE
MARRIED TO HER WORST ENEMY! VOL. 4

Rūpu 7-kai-me no Akuyaku Reijō wa, Moto Tekikoku de Jiyū
Kimamana Hanayome Seikatsu o Mankitsu suru Vol. 4

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&
In Which Raul Asks Risbe If
She Likes Arnold's Face*

Dramatis Personae

PER TIME LOOP, THE VILLAINESS ENJOYS A CAREFREE LIFE THANKED TO HER NOBLY FRIEND

Michel Hévin

Rishe's alchemy teacher in her third loop. His understanding of ethics is somewhat lacking, but he's possessed of an incredibly gifted mind, inventing things such as the pocket watch and gunpowder.

Kyle Morgan Cleverly

The eldest prince of the snowy country of Coyotles. Was suffering from a chronic illness, but his health is improving thanks to Rishe. Has entered a technological partnership with Galkheim.

Arnold Hein

Crown prince of the military nation of Galkheim, known for being coldhearted and cruel. He's been the cause of Rishe's deaths, directly or indirectly, in each of her previous lives. But this time, he asked for her hand in marriage. Out of the blue.

Rishe Irmgard Weitzner

A young woman who keeps dying at age twenty and rewinding to her broken engagement at age fifteen. On her seventh loop, she's now engaged to Crown Prince Arnold.

Leo Philips

Duke Jonal's servant. Was raised as an assassin but has vowed to serve Millia in earnest after the incident at the Bastille.

Millia Clarissa Jonal

The young, only daughter of Duke Jonal. The true royal priestess of the Church, whom Rishe served in her fourth loop.

Oliver Laurenz Friedheim

Arnold's attendant. Taken into Arnold's employ when his dreams of knighthood were crushed due to an injury. Something of a pilladoyen.

Theodore Auguste Hein

Arnold's freewheeling younger brother. After reconciling with Arnold, he now supports his brother from behind the scenes.

Curtis Samuel O'Fallon

The eldest prince of Siguel. He visits Galkheim with his sister, but...

Harriet Sophia O'Fallon

The eldest princess of Siguel. She has a political marriage lined up. She likes reading but has no confidence, and her eyes are often downcast.

Kaine Tully

An up-and-coming merchant and head of the Aria Trading Company. Rishe's boss and mentor in her first loop.

Elsie

A new maid who grew up in the slums and now serves Rishe. She's very opinionated about Rishe's wardrobe.

Chapter 1

RISHE DESCENDED the gently sloping stone steps before the vast ocean. The seventh-month sun shone clear and vibrant, bathing the seaside town in glittering light. Its rays seemed to reflect off buildings painted pure white, contrasting with the azure sky. A soft sea breeze blew through the streets, fluttering the light mint-green dress Rishe wore.

“Oh!” Rishe’s eyes brightened with excitement when she caught sight of the harbor. Winds from foreign lands always got her excited.

She gazed at the sea, holding her hat down against the wind. At the same time, Arnold, who was walking ahead, turned back and held out his hand to her.

“Rishe,” he said simply.

She guessed that the next few steps were treacherous. Arnold must have been worried she would trip in her high-heeled shoes.

With some hesitance, she took Arnold’s hand. “Thank you.”

“We’re in no rush. If you want to sightsee as you walk, just hold my hand, all right?”



Rishe was a little flustered. Her feelings were so strange of late. Restlessness and nervousness had her in their grips whenever Arnold showed concern for her. She tried to act as natural as possible, surveying the ships in the harbor.

“I believe our visitor has already disembarked. I’m looking forward to speaking with her.”

“You sure you didn’t want to wait back at the palace? You don’t need to meet with her now. She’ll be at the ceremony next month.”

“She arrived a whole month early, though! It’s a great opportunity to meet and befriend her, don’t you think?”

Rishe glanced over her shoulder. Arnold’s Imperial Guards followed them with easy smiles, not the least bit wary. After all, Rishe was the only one who knew what kind of reputation would precede their visitor in the future.

Upon arriving at the harbor, they rendezvoused with Oliver and a few knights who had gone ahead of them.

“She’s right over here. Let me take you to her.” Oliver’s gaze directed them to a spot where a large white umbrella was set up.

A woman stood beneath the umbrella. She was too far away for them to see her expression—furthermore, she hid her mouth with a folding fan.

That’s the “heinous criminal” who’s executed in the future. Rishe slowly pulled her hand free of Arnold’s. Four years from now, her lavish lifestyle empties the treasury of the country she marries into, and her husband the king beheads her for it.

The woman snapped the fan shut in a gesture of breathtaking elegance. As she approached them, her vibrant gold hair streamed behind her. Her deep-green dress was heavy for summer, but her steps were as light as if it didn’t weigh a thing.

It’s like she’s walking on clouds. No, not walking... Rishe blinked as she observed the woman. It’s like she’s sprinting toward us!

As soon as the thought entered Rishe’s head, the woman opened her mouth.

“Umm, I-I-I...!”

Er, what? Ack, wait! Oh no!

It was already too late. The woman tripped and fell on her face with a loud *splat*. Rishe tossed all apprehension aside and dashed over to her.

“Are you all right?!”

“I-I-I...I’m so sorryyyyy!” the woman wailed. She seemed as if she could burst into tears at any moment. Her long bangs covered her eyes, however, so Rishe couldn’t be sure. “I offer my sincerest apologies for causing you so much trouble with my existence! Th-this is a gesture in an eastern country that means, ‘You may behead me at any time if you wish!’”

“No, please raise your head! There’s no need to do that!”

While the woman attempted to kiss the cobblestone with her forehead, Rishe yanked her upright. Arnold watched from a slight distance with a look that said, *You don’t need to bother with that*. Still, Rishe couldn’t help herself as she regarded the trembling woman in her arms.

Goodness! It’s unbelievable, but I’m certain this woman is...

Their visit to the seaside Galkhein town had been decided a few days earlier, about a week after they’d returned from the Grand Basilica in the Holy Kingdom of Domana. Rishe had resumed her routine at the detached palace. She got up early to train and build stamina, tended to her field, and supervised her maids’ work. At the same time, she had other duties to attend to: her ongoing negotiations with the Aria Trading Company, letters from Michel that needed replies, and preparation for her and Arnold’s wedding. Despite all this hustle and bustle, an inexplicable cloud had settled over Rishe’s heart.

Perhaps it was only natural for her brother-in-law, Theodore, to pick up on what was bothering her.

“Oh, Sisteer,” he said in singsong while he and Rishe walked through the halls of the palace. Theodore’s eyes narrowed in mirth as he peered into her face. “Are you listening to me?”

“Hrk! O-of course I am. I’m relieved to hear that you and Mr. Tully are working together so well.”

Rishe had struck a deal with the Aria Trading Company, which she had been very involved with in her first life. She had taught Tully how to make her nail polish and given the Aria Trading Company the exclusive rights to sell it. In exchange, they were to hire workers from the slums to manufacture the product.

At this point, it was Theodore's project—he knew more about the situation in the slums than anyone else. He also knew more than Rishe when it came to goods circulation in Galkhein and how to procure the necessary materials. At first, Theodore hesitated over accepting the position because he didn't want to steal Rishe's glory, but when Rishe insisted—"My goal right now is not to do business but to live a life of absolute indolence!"—he gave in with exasperation.

But Rishe was currently taking up Theodore's interest whether she liked it or not. "My brother told me to support you, so of course I'm doing everything in my power there. That's not important right now, though. What's bothering you, Sister?"

Rishe lowered her gaze at Theodore's direct question. "It's not so much that something's bothering me..."

Lately, Rishe's chest ached whenever she was around Arnold. She wasn't completely worry-free when they were apart either. When he wasn't at her side, her loneliness constricted her heart.

"I'm worried about Prince Arnold," Rishe muttered. When Theodore frowned, she felt flustered and hurried to explain. "I-It's not that he's acting strange or anything! He's just...so busy."

"Ah, that. Yeah, I get it." Theodore nodded in understanding, so Rishe asked him an additional question.

"Your brother handles a vast number of duties all by himself, does he not? Even if you *have* been helping him more as of late."

"Yeah. I hear my brother handles about the same number of duties as my father now... But my father has a lot of loyal retainers, you know." Theodore paused for a breath as he walked down the hallway. "In contrast, my brother has a lot of enemies in the palace."

"Enemies?"

"It's because his ways are starkly different from our father's. Some people no longer benefit from the way my brother does things or have lost their positions because of him."

Now that Rishe thought about it, she recalled running into Prince Arnold once during his confrontation with Galkhein's earl marshal. The earl marshal had seemed confident at the time; Rishe now realized that he must have been acting on the emperor's authority.

All the important people in Galkhein are the emperor's retainers. At this stage, Arnold Hein doesn't yet have the retainers he will in the future. Following that train of thought, Rishe recalled the names of Arnold's future military leaders.

There was one other thing Rishe was itching to ask—something that had occurred to her during her time with Arnold at the Grand Basilica.

"Speaking of His Majesty, where do your father's wives reside?"

"Not the empress, but his other wives?"

"Yes. Do they live in detached palaces like mine?"

"Well, there were quite a few of them, but aside from Her Majesty, they're all dead now," Theodore said breezily.

Rishe froze, gaping at the prince.

Theodore came to a stop several steps ahead of her and wheeled around, a beautiful smile on his face. "Didn't I tell you? You won't find happiness marrying into our family."

Rishe swallowed hard, while Theodore continued to look as smooth as new cream.

"Oh, that's right!" he said. "A message from Tully: 'I'll have that information you requested in a few days.'"

"Er, thank you."

"Also, if you're worried about my brother, then you should stop being so reckless. I mean, taking a poison arrow in the neck while protecting someone?! You're unbelievable!"

Rishe could say nothing in response, but she wondered where he got his information. She was once again impressed by his intelligence network.

With a "Well, see you!" and a smile, Theodore departed. Rishe took a deep breath. Her guards were still walking a little ways away to give them some privacy. Returning to the detached palace with them in tow, Rishe just happened to bump into Arnold in the entrance hall.

“Rishe.”

Her shoulders almost shot to her ears when he called her name, but she refused to display such a response. She forced a smile and looked up at Arnold. “Good day, Prince Arnold.”

She felt herself sweating internally as he turned his blue eyes on her. She was attempting to interact with him as she always did, but had she messed up somehow?

If she had, Arnold made no mention of it. Instead, he said, “This is good timing. I was just about to have someone get you.” His voice neutral, he added, “I’ll be leaving the palace for a short time.”

“Huh?” Rishe blinked rapidly.

“You’ll be on your own, but don’t worry—I’ll leave plenty of guards with you. Make use of them however you wish.”

“You need to leave for official business?”

“I must go meet some foreign guests. They’ll be coming for our wedding and staying in Vinrhys until then.”

Their wedding was about a month away. It wasn’t all that unusual that guests from far and wide had already begun to arrive, considering possible delays on the road. On the hosts’ side, it was customary to put these guests up comfortably in a castle. Arnold was probably planning on going by himself because this was but a preliminary greeting ahead of the event.

“Is Vinrhys far away?”

“It’s on the western coast. Probably four days by carriage.”

“Won’t it be inconvenient to go so far when you’re so busy?”

“I experimented with keeping in touch with Theodore on our trip to Domana, and it went well. If I employ the same methods and work on the road, it shouldn’t present any problems.”

Well, that was good news, yet Rishe still wasn’t satisfied. *Prince Arnold won’t be around for a while...*

Without meaning to, she frowned. Also without meaning to, she grabbed Arnold’s sleeve.

“What’s wrong?” Arnold asked gently.

“Wh—” It confused her to hear him being so tender, but that

wasn't why the question got stuck in her throat. "What...is this?"

No one was more surprised than Rishe by her own actions. Arnold would be gone—and the effect that news had on her emotions was incomprehensible.

Is it... She cast her gaze to the floor. *Is it that I...?*

"Do you want to come with?"

"Huh?" Rishe lifted her head with a start. She felt like Arnold had read her mind.

"To the ocean," Arnold clarified, face unreadable.

Rishe nodded several times. "Y-yes! I want to go to the ocean!"

Arnold peered at her, deep in thought. "You must prepare for the wedding, though. If you come with me, won't you be pushing yourself too hard again?"

"My share of the work is easy enough to do there." It was not Rishe who was most busy now but rather the diplomats and laborers putting the wedding together. There was less and less for Rishe herself to tackle.

Arnold regarded Rishe's hand on his sleeve with a dispassionate glance. After a beat, he said, just as softly as before, "I'll take you with me, then."

Rishe was so happy, it felt like flowers were blooming in her heart.

The Galkhein ocean!

She'd agreed without thinking, but it *was* true that she wanted to visit the ocean. A port town that saw the comings and goings of so many foreign vessels would have no shortage of spectacles. Her eyes sparkled as she imagined it.

"Oliver, make the arrangements."

"As you say."

"Thank you, Oliver! Incidentally, who is it we're greeting?"

If they were going to the western coast, their visitors would either be from the western or the southern continent. Rishe was going over her mental list of the invitees when Arnold answered.

"The Siguel royals. Prince Curtis and his sister, Harriet."

Siguel was a country Rishe was very familiar with. *I never met Princess Harriet, but I know all about His Highness Prince Curtis.*

Rishe took a short breath as the man appeared in her mind's eye. *After all, I served his family in my life as a hunter.*

Located on the western continent, Siguel was called the country of writing due to its plethora of books. The royal family possessed a printing press, and the people were not in want of reading material. More than anything else, though, the ruling family simply loved books.

Four years after Rishe had begun serving Siguel in her fifth life, the royal family heard the terrible news.

"Prince Curtis hasn't left his bed in days," one of Rishe's hunting troop members said sorrowfully.

"I don't blame him. I mean, his sister was executed. She must have changed after marriage."

"I just can't believe it. Princess Harriet emptied the national treasury and drove her people into poverty with lavish spending?"

Their voices were hushed inside the room they'd been given. Curious, Rishe turned to one of her fellow hunters. "Princess Harriet was executed?"

"Oh, that's right. You didn't come to this country until after Princess Harriet moved in with her fiancé's family."

Rishe nodded, and one of the hunters filled in the details for her. "Princess Harriet left for a political marriage. It was necessary for Siguel to maintain their relationship with an allied nation. But she was executed as a heinous criminal by the family she married into."

"Yeah, and now Siguel has to pay reparations for Princess Harriet's crimes. It's being struck from the alliance as well."

It was ill news indeed. While Rishe contemplated this, a hand plopped down on the hood covering her head. "Eep!"

"Hey, Rishe. Fellas. I'm back."

A stir went through the room at the return of the man they'd all

been waiting for.

“Chief! How’d your recon of the hunting ground go?”

“Well, I’m tired. I can tell you that much. Fabrannia’s in a real sorry state. The rural areas are starving, and all the wealth’s concentrated in the capital. Even there, you can see a huge gap between the rich and the poor!”

The hunters’ faces all fell at the man’s overly cheery report.

“I heard all about it from the merchants. They confirmed that Harriet spent money like it grew on trees—buying up jewels and dresses from overseas. What a headache, ha ha.”

Rishe wanted to get a good look at the man too, but his hand on her head was preventing it. She fidgeted, somehow squirming out of his grasp, and turned to face him.

“Hey, Ra—”

“Siguel’s going to war with Galkhein.”

The hunters gasped.

“Chief, is that true? Before, His Majesty said he didn’t intend to get involved.”

“It was presented as an alternative method of reconciliation with Fabrannia. If Siguel supports Fabrannia in their war efforts, they don’t have to pay reparations and they can stay as allies.”

All joviality had seeped out of the man’s voice, and a sneer had ousted the breezy smile from his face.

“Queen Harriet was a heinous criminal. Fabrannia wants Siguel to take responsibility for her.”

Once married into Fabrannia’s royal family, Queen Harriet leeches off the country’s coffers while her husband struggled with illness. The people starved, counterfeit money circulated, and the queen paid no mind to her nation’s ruin. Eventually, the king recovered with the help of a certain apothecary, and when he learned of his wife’s misdeeds, he despaired and sent her to the axe. That was the Queen Harriet story Rishe heard, anyhow.

I’m having some doubts, though.

In a room in a small castle on top of a tall cliff, Rische looked down at a young woman sitting in a chair and blubbing through her tears.

“Urgh... Hic!”

It was the future Queen Harriet.

She doesn't look like an evil queen who lives lavishly while her people starve, Rische thought.

While one couldn't always judge a book by its cover, people's values and morals were typically evident from their behavior.

Harriet had blonde hair that went down to her waist. Although clearly well cared for, it was in total disarray. It seemed to Rische that she'd given up on it, letting it grow on its own. Her bangs were long enough to cover her eyes, like a shield that protected her from the prying gazes of others.

Rische sat opposite her and said, “Please calm down, Princess Harriet.” She attempted to organize the information the crying princess had given her. “Let me make sure I understand your situation. You're visiting Galkhein from Fabrannia, where you're residing until your marriage. Your brother, Prince Curtis, is coming on another ship from Siguel. Am I right so far?”

“Y-yes.”

“Got it. So on your ship, you had a guard detail of a few lady knights, but they all came down with food poisoning.” Rische grimaced, feeling sorry for the poor knights from the bottom of her heart. They had to have been in rough shape after enduring nothing but nausea aboard the rocking ship. Being royalty, Harriet must have escaped the same fate because she was the only one eating other food.

“Th-ther should be another group of lady knights from my country on my brother's ship too, for situations like this, but...b-but...” Harriet sniffled hard, unable to continue.

“Since your brother took a different route, his ship is still on its way, so you've arrived in Galkhein by yourself first.” As she spoke, Rische glanced at Arnold. He stood silently behind her, exuding an aura that was one hundred percent uninterested and loath to get involved. Nevertheless, she asked, “Prince Arnold, might we use some of your Imperial Guards to escort Princess Harriet?”

“That's what we must do,” he replied. “Oliver.”

“Of course. I’ll make the arrangements.”

“Um, I...” Harriet’s voice, thick with tears, came in halting syllables. “I’m sorry... I appreciate your consideration...b-but I cannot accept your kindness! I-I’m under strict instructions from my fiancé, you see...”

The fiancé in question being the king of Fabrannia.

“I-I’m not allowed to be near any men who aren’t my husband!”

That wasn’t such a strange stipulation.

“Your generosity is w-wasted on me, I’m afraid... I-I’m sorry, I’m so sorry!” She apologized profusely between hitching sobs, her voice tiny. All but folding in on herself, Harriet whispered, surely intending for no one to hear, “I just want to crawl into a hole...”

Harriet was at the end of her rope.

Oh, this won’t do. I didn’t expect her to prostrate herself before us on our first meeting. She’s worried about troubling Galkhein because she doesn’t have her own guards with her.

And lo, her worries had become a reality. Perplexed, Oliver whispered to Arnold, “What shall we do, my lord?”

“We can’t just have a foreign guest staying here with no guards. There’s nothing else we can do.”

As Arnold spoke with his attendant, Rishe sidled up behind him.

“Galkhein doesn’t have any female knights,” Oliver pointed out.

“There are hardly any countries that do. Even on the western continent. And—” Arnold paused, glancing back at Rishe as she stood there waiting for him to address her. “Supposing we somehow manage to find a skilled female mercenary, that’s not the sort of person we can trust to guard foreign royalty.”

“Hey, Your Highness.”

“There’s no way we can find someone on such short notice who’s skilled enough to serve as her guard, whose background we can verify, and who knows the proper etiquette for—”

Rishe tugged Arnold’s sleeve. “Psst. Prince Arnold!”

After several seconds, Arnold sighed and regarded Rishe with resignation. “What is it?”

It's not like Arnold to ask a question he already knows the answer to, Rishe thought as she raised her hand. "I can serve as Princess Harriet's guard!"

"What are you saying, Lady Rishe?!"

In contrast to Oliver's shock, Arnold clutched his forehead, head bowed. The air about him said plainly, *I was afraid this would happen.*

"Do you believe my command of etiquette is lacking, Prince Arnold?"

"No."

"Have you ever suspected my background to be less than legitimate?"

"Of course not."

Rishe smiled at the sour face Arnold was making. "Well, what about my sword skills, then?"

"..."

There was no one more qualified than Rishe. While she might have been betrothed to the crown prince, she herself was little more than a duke's daughter from a small country. Young women of her status often served as princesses' maids. In Rishe's mind, appointing herself as a guard for a short time wasn't an unreasonable idea.

"You just want to do it for fun."

"Urk!"

"And you're plotting something again, aren't you?"

"Well, do you have any arguments against it, Your Highness? If something happens to Princess Harriet while she's without an escort, it will be Galkhein's responsibility, will it not?"

Arnold surely wished to prevent such a complication.

"It's true that my skill pales in comparison to yours and that of your Imperial Guards, but I believe I could prove quite handy as an escort."

"That's not my issue with this." Arnold gazed at Rishe in earnest and then lowered his lips to her ear. "I'm most concerned about *your* safety."

Rishe started, his rumbling voice tickling her eardrum. *I'm sure*

those words have ulterior reasons behind them, but still!

She stepped back, flustered, resisting the urge to snap back at him. “Rather than considering me someone who must be protected, I would prefer it if you assumed me capable of fending off most enemies!”

“I never said I didn’t trust you. I believe in your courage and your sword skills,” Arnold said with some reluctance before sighing again. “I would like to know what you’re scheming, though.”

“That’s my little secret.”

“Isn’t it always?” He thought a moment. “Can I ask you to do this for a little while?”

Rishe smiled with relief. “Yes! Leave it to me, Your Highness!” She was turning toward Harriet when Arnold grabbed her arm. “Ah!”

“Don’t forget, though.” Arnold’s voice was quiet, as if he were carefully etching the words into her memory. “You may be able to ‘fend off most enemies,’ but you’re still under my protection.”

“Y-yep! Got it!” Rishe’s heart thrummed, fit to burst. She wished he’d go a little easier on her.

Willing her cheeks not to redden, Rishe headed for Harriet. The foreign princess was folded over on her chair, overwhelmed to the point of tears.

“Apologies for the wait, Princess Harriet.” Rishe knelt before her. *Wow, this reminds me of my life as a knight!*

With grace and poise, Rishe took Harriet’s dainty hand. She didn’t give it a gentle squeeze, as she might have when dressed as a boy. Still, she smiled, wishing to comfort the princess.

“Please don’t cry. I will protect you from any misfortune that may befall you.”

“Huh?!”

Following all the rules of chivalry that had been beaten into her, Rishe made a vow to the lady before her. “I swear I will defend you...so please be at ease, won’t you, my lady?”

With a squeak, the face hidden behind Harriet’s bangs instantly flushed red.

The small castle designated for Harriet's stay was on the outskirts of Vinrhys. It stood atop a small hill overlooking the seaside town. It only took some fifteen to twenty minutes to return to the town from there.

Rishe sauntered through the lively town with Harriet in tow. Her guards trailed behind. A few of Harriet's attendants also accompanied them, rounding off the large procession and making it obvious that someone important was in town. Rishe had tried to explain that they would stand out like this, but Harriet's head maid had been quite insistent.

"That will not do," she'd said. "No matter the situation, if Galkhein's crown princess is serving as Princess Harriet's escort, then the least her maids can do is stay by Her Highness's side to lessen your load as much as we can, Lady Rishe."

The head maid seemed similar in age to Rishe's mother. She spoke so matter-of-factly that Rishe found herself unable to argue. Thus, their outing had ended up with a party of ten.

I hope the princess can at least enjoy our stroll.

Rishe turned to Harriet and smiled. "You're not tired, are you, Lady Harriet?"

"Wh-what?! Er, I..." Harriet hung her head, clearly distressed. She shot a look at her maids before continuing. "I-I'm fine. Please don't concern yourself with me..."

"I can't do that. You said you wanted to see one of Galkhein's towns since you came all this way." Rishe put a hand over her heart in a most knightly gesture and added, "I'd at least like you to enjoy the experience."

A sword hung at her waist, its black scabbard adorned with gold ornamentation. It was Arnold's spare sword. The weapon was a bit big for Rishe, but he had lent it to her with the words, "It's better than nothing."

He'd given her his sword belt as well, but it was too large for her even on its tightest notch, so she'd poked a new hole in it. Arnold looked slender, but he was solidly built compared to Rishe.

All this reminds me of my knight's training.

Fastening the belt around her dress and hanging Arnold's sword from it, Rishe started to feel more like she was back in her sixth loop. She'd been instructed by her king—a devoted husband—that all knights must show the utmost respect to women. Though she merely *dressed* like a man in that loop, Rishe had exercised chivalry whenever possible.

"The sea breeze isn't too cold, is it? If it's too bright out, I can fetch you a parasol. We'll walk at your pace, so feel free to direct me."

"I...I-I-I couldn't *possibly*!" Harriet spluttered.

"I beg of you, do not show any restraint with me, my lady." Rishe took Harriet's small, pale hand and beamed at her once again. "All I wish is for you to enjoy our day together. I vow to do everything in my power to make that happen."

"S-so dazzling..."

"Would you like a parasol after all?"

Harriet covered her eyes and shook her head. She cast her gaze to the ground in embarrassment, her long bangs concealing her face.

Watching from several meters behind, the head maid coolly remarked, "Your Highness, if you dig your heels in any deeper, it will be rude to Lady Rishe."

Harriet's small frame jolted, and she seemed to shrink in on herself even more.

The head maid sighed—from the bottom of her soul, it seemed. "His Majesty was kind enough to suggest you enjoy some shopping in Galkhein. Why not visit some jewelers to contribute to Galkhein's economy?"

"Hrk..." Harriet's face was hidden, but her anguish was discernible enough. "But, um, the money..."

"What about the money? His Majesty entrusted you with plenty of Galkhein currency, did he not?" the head maid curtly pointed out. "In the first place, even if you did not have such funds, it is a lady's duty to act as the embodiment of elegance at times like these. The opinion that others have of you reflects on His Majesty as well. I try and try, and your behavior never changes! Lady Rishe, please allow me to apologize on behalf of my mistress."

Rishe blinked and turned her smile on the head maid. “No, Miss Head Maid.”

She stepped forward and took the maid’s hand, as she had with Harriet. The maid’s eyes bugged out of their sockets, but Rishe paid it no mind. “While a lady’s behavior certainly reflects upon her husband as well, I beseech you not to worry about such things in front of *me*, at least.”

“Wh-what do you mean by that? And why are you holding my hand, Lady Rishe?!”

“I believe that the measure of His Majesty the King of Fabrannia should be taken from his own behavior. My impression of him won’t change because of Princess Harriet’s actions.” Rishe noted the maid’s crinkled eyes blinking back at her in astonishment. “Besides, I think it’s sweet that Princess Harriet doesn’t want to trouble me.” Rishe turned to Harriet, making the princess flinch. “I want you to know that it’s no imposition. Nothing would make me happier as your escort than for you to be at ease and smile.”

“Eep!”

“If you’d like to go shopping, we could go tomorrow. I’ll have the Aria Trading Company, whom I trust a great deal, bring a variety of goods for us to peruse.” She peered at Harriet’s eyes, hidden behind her bangs. “Perhaps there’s something you could do for your maids, Princess Harriet.”

“Huh?” Harriet’s voice trembled with uncertainty.

“If you’re hesitant to voice your own desires, maybe there’s something you could do for your maids instead.”

“What are you saying, Lady Rishe?!” the head maid exclaimed, shaking her head. “There’s no need to pay us any mind. And Princess Harriet—”

“Um...” Harriet opened her mouth at last, gathering her feeble courage. “C-could we go somewhere cool, then?! Somewhere the maids can all sit and rest? I’m sure the voyage was much harder on them than it was on me in my first-class cabin...” Harriet’s voice faded more and more as she shrank in on herself. “I-I’m sorry. I’ve been too forward. I’m sorryyy...” Her words faded into a tiny squeak at the end.

Rishe glanced at the head maid, whose jaw had fallen open,

before smiling. While they walked, Harriet had been surveying her maids over and over again. Rishe had wondered if she was just concerned about their eyes on her, but she'd also thought that perhaps Harriet was worried about them. The latter suspicion had proven true.

"Very well. I will take us to a place with terrace seating, then." Rishe had just arrived in this town herself, but she remembered the map Arnold had shown her. There were several places that overlooked the sea where they could rest in a cool, shaded area at this time of day. "I see you're able to muster your courage when it's for other people, Lady Harriet."

Harriet balked. It obviously took her an immense amount of resolve to make requests, but for her fatigued maids, she was able to say what she needed to say.

"Lady Harriet, you truly are a kind soul, aren't you?"

"N-no, I, um...!"

Rishe was reaching for Harriet but stopped midway. She wheeled on a white building to one side behind her, searching. Near the roof, flying seabirds squawked at one another. Against the blue sky, a cumulonimbus cloud shone radiant in the sunlight.

"Is something the matter, Lady Rishe?" one of the Imperial Guards asked.

"I heard a child crying or something similar," she told him. "I thought I might go see what it was about."

"A child's voice? Let us go."

"I'd like you knights to watch Lady Harriet for a moment. With her maids around, I'm sure it's fine if some men guard her for just a minute."

"Wait, Lady Rishe!"

Rishe slipped into an alley before her guards could stop her. She walked silently, masking her presence as much as possible. She turned two corners and headed deeper into the white alleyway. There wasn't a single person there.

That's not quite true, though. She inhaled and lowered her hand to the hilt of Arnold's sword.

From above, someone fell on her.

In a flash, she drew the sword and blocked the blow pressing down on her. The movement was less premeditated and more pure swordsman's instinct. There was a *clang* as metal clashed with metal.

The figure drew back and laughed as if he were having great fun. It was a tall man clad in a gray cloak, hood low over his face. Only his mouth could be seen, curved in an amused grin.

"Hello there, adorable little lady. That was a fantastic greeting just now. I suppose you couldn't just stay put with me watching you like that, could you?"

Rishe stared straight at the figure, sword at the ready.

I've never seen this person, nor do I recognize his voice. But his movements... Hmm.

"Say, how'd you notice me?" At first, his words emerged in the unfamiliar rasps of an elderly man, but when he spoke next, he sounded younger and stronger. "I've been watching you from the rooftops all this time, you know."

Rishe narrowed her eyes at the interloper's playful tone. "Nothing special about what I did. I just took a stroll in places I thought would be easily observable."

She shifted her stance and swept her sword to the side. She'd put on a little muscle since her last attempt, so she had less trouble wielding a heavier sword.

"It's a habit of mine when I want to confirm an area's safety."

"Ha ha! A habit, she says! Fending off an attack from your blind spot is just a habit, huh? You're a rare one, aren't you?" The hooded man deliberated for a moment. "Even when I'm chatting with you, you leave no openings. I came down because I was interested, but that was a mistake, wasn't it?" He stared pointedly at Rishe's face. "Well, it's been a pleasure, Miss, but I think I'll have you take a little nap—whoa!"

Rishe's sword grazed the man's hood. He dodged, but no matter; she would attack again. Undaunted, she stepped forward and flipped her sword with another swing. Again and again, she whipped the sword around, but each time, her whole torso swung with it. She had to be careful, but she didn't let up on pushing the man in the cloak back with each attack. The next instant, a knife sailed toward her eyes, and she twisted to avoid it.

“Oh, you dodged that, eh?”

He was going to stab me in the eye...

She leaped into close range with the man and slashed at him. He dodged her attacks quick as a cat, but his movements were easy to follow as well. She slashed sideways at him, and the man grinned.

“So fast!”

There was a high-pitched *clang* as the man’s knife blocked her attack.

“Thing is, I don’t have a lot of time to play anymore.” His tongue flicked at his lips. “My coral-haired lady, your beauty is truly a rare wonder in all the world. I don’t suppose we could have a more meaningful dialogue than trying to kill each other?”

“I’m working, unfortunately. And I wasn’t under the impression that we were trying to kill each other.”

“Yeah, right! You’ve been aiming at my face!”

“Don’t worry. I’ve already accomplished my goal.”

From where she was now, she could see his eyes underneath the hood. *Knew it. I don’t recognize this face...but I don’t need to.*

The man had red eyes; that told her more than anything else.

Rishe leaped back, sword and all, and the man smirked and cocked his head. “True, I don’t sense real bloodlust from you. I see, I see.”

At that moment, one of Arnold’s Imperial Guards shouted Rishe’s name from the street. “Lady Rishe!”

The man’s cloak whipped around as he sprinted down the alley and out of sight. Rishe slowly sheathed her sword and watched him go. They were some distance from the main street, but they’d been loud enough for the knights to hear, apparently. Two had come running.

“Lady Rishe, what happened?! I thought I heard swords clashing...”

Rishe gave an apologetic dip of her head. “I’m sorry. It was just a cat and a crow fighting, not a child crying.”

“A cat and a crow, my lady?”

“I drew my sword to intervene, but it was so heavy, I dropped it...

That's all that happened, really."

The knights sighed in relief. "As long as you're all right, Lady Rishe. Please leave such things to us in the future, though."

"I'm sorry, you two."

Rishe walked back toward the main road, shooting a glance over her shoulder as she went. There was no trace of anyone in the alleyway. She returned to Harriet's side with the knights and said nothing of the incident.

A real guard would report what just happened.

She thought back to an earlier exchange with Arnold.

"Can you entertain the princess?" Arnold had asked her as he prepared to go out.

"Of course. Where are you going, Prince Arnold?"

"I have a few things to take care of here in town. I'll be back by nightfall."

Oliver had been just as busy issuing orders to the knights. That confirmed one of Rishe's suspicions: Arnold wasn't interested in engaging with Harriet in the name of diplomacy at all. He must've had a different goal here than merely entertaining a foreign visitor.

She had thought it strange that Arnold himself would come all this way just to greet some visitors. From experience, she knew Arnold only acted when he had multiple reasons to do so. Previously, when he'd gone into town with Rishe to buy her a ring, he was also there to observe Kyle's entrance into the country. When he'd accompanied Rishe to the Grand Basilica, it wasn't just to take care of accumulating work related to the Crusade Church but to intimidate them as well. This time was no different.

As Rishe watched, Arnold shrugged his jacket on and said, "It's nothing of concern, just something I want to check on. More importantly, this sword isn't right for your build. I know you'll be surrounded by guards, but don't push yourself." He picked up the sword leaning against his chair and held it out to her.

"Thank you for lending it to me, Your Highness."

Arnold gazed at her pensively. "I thought..."

She cocked her head and waited for him to continue. Arnold sighed.

“I thought your mood might improve if you saw the ocean.” Rishe blinked and Arnold looked at her skeptically, as if there was something she hadn’t caught on to. “You seem dejected lately.”

Rishe’s heart thumped against her rib cage. *He was worried about me?*

Guilt arose in her at the same time. Lately, whenever she thought about Arnold, a strange and lonely ache settled in the left side of her chest. Arnold must have noticed the change.

“Oh, no! Nothing troubles me that you must worry over, Your Highness!”

“I don’t know about that. You have no regard for yourself.”

Her own criminal record rendered her unable to respond, but Arnold was one to talk. Before she could formulate a rebuttal, a big hand landed on her head and stroked her hair.

“I apologize for making you work out here. I’ll make it up to you.”

Rishe’s ears burned at the remembrance of his indulgent tone. She wanted to curl up into a ball just thinking about it. *I was the one who asked to be Lady Harriet’s guard!*

“Is something the matter, Lady Rishe?” a knight asked her.

“N-no, it’s nothing! Let’s hurry and get back to Lady Harriet.”

Back on the main road, she could see Harriet speaking with the head maid. *Her Highness Princess Harriet, sister to Prince Curtis. I never did meet him in my life as a hunter.*

Her habit of hiding her face in her outgrown hair. Her oppressive-looking dress, fabric too thick and color too dark for the hot summer.

She doesn’t strike me as the type to thoughtlessly spend a nation into bankruptcy.

Rishe had to be careful if she wanted to figure this out. It would be foolish to believe rumors without confirming the facts for herself. At the same time, she couldn’t be fooled into discarding all her current information by the behavior of the person before her.

It's Lady Harriet's execution that leads to Siguel's involvement in the war with Galkhein. I'd like to turn them away from that fated path.

She could at last hear the head maid's voice. "Listen to me, Your Highness. You must not presume upon Lady Rishe's consideration." Her words rang clear and harsh. That, combined with her age, brought Rishe's mother to mind. "You must make a positive impression and foster good relations between Fabrannia and Galkhein. It is His Majesty's fervent desire that our two countries have a favorable relationship."

"I-I know... I'm sorry for my behavior." Harriet hung her head low, words trickling out one after another. "I-I'm a princess. I have no worth if I'm not benefiting my father, my brother, and my husband in some way. I need to try harder... I need to try harder..."

"Lady Harriet!"

"Bwuh?!"

Rishe flashed the floundering Harriet a friendly smile. "I'm so sorry for the wait. It turned out to be nothing of import, so let's head to that shop! There are so many wonderful stores on the way. All sorts of things pass through this town for trade, you see."

She chatted away as she walked, and Harriet listened, head bowed. Rishe watched her, keeping an eye on their surroundings for anything suspicious. Soon, evening fell like a curtain over the town.

"Well, please get some rest in your room until dinner, Lady Harriet."

"Erm, yes, thank you."

They said their goodbyes at Harriet's door and parted ways. Now that Rishe was done with her task of chaperoning the princess, she breathed a sigh of relief.

I'm off guard duty until we leave tomorrow.

Galkhein's knights would secure the castle, and the guests didn't need any extra protection. If they made such a request, it would be the same as saying, "I don't trust your security."

Rishe found herself thinking of the hooded man from earlier. *Now I just need to decide whether I should report him to Prince Arnold.*

What had Arnold come to this town to do? Her course of action

would depend on that, but she had no clues as to his motives. She headed for her maids' room as she pondered the matter.

"I'm here, everyone. Is Elsie around? There's something I'd like to—what's wrong?"

Her dozen maids stood close together, frozen in place.

Elsie stepped forward, pale and trembling. "W-well, Lady Rishe..."

When Rishe heard what the girl had to say, her breath caught in her throat.

Several hours later, Rishe's head shot up when she heard the footsteps of the one she'd been waiting for in the dining hall.

"Prince Arnold!"

"What is it?"

Rishe shoved off from her chair and scampered over to Arnold. His brows knitted; he'd no doubt caught on to the abnormality of the situation from the pallor of her face.

"Did something happen while you were guarding the princess?"

"Er, no." Rishe shook her head. She clung to Arnold's jacket, eyes darting around the room. "It's just, there's something I'd like to ask of you, Your Highness—though I know it's incredibly rude."

"Go ahead. Don't be afraid. I'll listen, whatever it is."

Even with Arnold's reassuring words, the despondence lingered on Rishe's face. She was pressed up against Arnold, working up the nerve to speak. "I'd like to sleep in the same room as you, Prince Arnold."

"...What?"

Naturally, that wasn't the whole story. Knowing she had to explain herself, Rishe looked around again, making sure there was no one nearby but the two of them.

"Well, you see..."

She'd practically forgotten about almost getting her eye gouged in an alleyway a few hours earlier. A much greater terror had gripped her

heart, and she struggled to open up about it.

“My maids said they saw a ghost!”

“So?”

The dining hall was still deserted. Arnold hadn't called any kitchen staff, doing his best to calm Rishe down alone. He sat her in a chair, took a seat next to her, and gently stroked her hair.

“Take your time. I'm not going anywhere, so just calm down and explain the situation.”

“Right. Well, um, my maids were cleaning all the rooms...” Rishe did her best to recount the story they relayed to her. “While they were in one room, they heard a window opening in the next room over, which no one was supposed to be in. It was a strange, shrill creak.”

“Well, this *is* a castle by the sea. The hinges are probably rusted.”

“A maid went to check on the window, but it was closed. She thought it was just her imagination, so she went out into the hall to change out the water in her bucket when she saw a humanoid figure in the distance!”

Rishe shuddered and curled in on herself, remembering the fear that had gripped her when she heard the story.

“If a normal person were there, then you'd hear footsteps, right? But the figure just slid away without a sound...” She imagined the scene vividly, though she hadn't witnessed it with her own eyes. “And the next thing they knew, it just vanished.”

Arnold regarded the shivering Rishe in silence. She was terrified of ghosts. As she had died several times and continued to linger in this life due to her strange fate, she couldn't rule out the existence of specters and the like.

“So you're afraid of this...disappearing person?” he asked at last.

“You're not scared, Your Highness?!”

“Even if ghosts did exist, what could something with no physical form do?”

“Th-that logic only comes from people who aren’t afraid of ghosts!”

Still, Arnold’s words were comforting. “This sort of thing is scarier the more frightened the people around you are, right?”

Rishe hung her head as Arnold stroked her hair. “My maids were spooked out of their minds, so I pretended I was unfazed. I told them there was no such thing as ghosts, which helped my maids calm down, but then I couldn’t tell them, ‘Actually, I’m scared too’...”

“Then you shut yourself away in the dining hall and waited for me to show up?”

She nodded, not unlike a wooden puppet.

“What about all these candlesticks on the table?”

“Well, I wanted it to be as bright as possible...”

She’d thought about staying with the maids as well, but she didn’t think she could save face for long. Instead, she sat here and waited for Arnold’s return, calling his name over and over again in her mind. Naturally, she kept that last bit to herself, gazing up at him now that he was physically beside her. Arnold had the grace not to laugh.

“By the way, Your Highness, did you want to eat?”

“I’m busy consoling you.”

“Oh?”

He said it like it was a task of the highest priority. She knew she couldn’t keep indulging herself, but she felt more secure than she ever had in any of her lives, sitting there with him.

“I really like the ocean.”

“I thought you would.”

“But if I think a ghost could appear in my room, the crash of the waves might scare me.”

“...”

“I think it will be difficult to stay in my room by myself.” She clutched her dress with her right hand and Arnold’s jacket with her left. “Prince Arnold, I...”

Arnold’s expression was complicated, throwing Rishe into a fluster.

“I-I knew it! I’m being a bother to you, aren’t I?! A grown woman like me asking to sleep in the same room!”

“That’s not it.” Arnold shut his eyes and sighed as if he were truly at his wits’ end. “That’s not it.”

He said it twice! Why?

Still frowning, Arnold went on, “I think there’s a double on the fourth floor, on the south side. Is that room usable?”

“Y-yes! I had my maids clean the entire castle, so it should be spotless.” Rishe’s lashes fluttered as she blinked in surprise. “You’ll really sleep in the same room as me?”

“You think I can just peel you off of me and toss you back in your own room?” He must have meant her grip on his jacket. It embarrassed her to cling to him so, but she wanted to stay that way a little longer.

Unfortunately, a knock on the dining hall door prompted her to release him. One of Arnold’s Imperial Guards intruded upon their alone time. “Pardon me, Your Highness. A messenger just arrived.”

I-I’m glad I pulled away! Rishe folded her hands atop her knees, relieved that she hadn’t been caught acting so pathetically.

“The messenger first arrived on a small boat. He said Prince Curtis’s ship will reach the harbor in about an hour.”

Rishe was relieved to hear it. She was sure Harriet would be glad as well.

Arnold responded with his signature impassivity. “Summon Oliver immediately, then.”

“Yes, Your Highness. Also, it seems Prince Curtis dined on the ship tonight, so he won’t require a meal.”

“How’s security at the docks?”

“As for that, well...”

Come to think of it, there was a rumor about a ghost ship off the coast of Siguel, wasn’t there? Wait, why am I remembering that now?!

Rishe shook the thought from her mind, willing it to fade as she stared at the floor in silence. She found herself forlorn again now that she’d pulled away from Arnold, but she had to exercise restraint in front of the knight. At least, that was what she told herself.

Right then, Arnold's hand brushed against hers. Before she knew it, their fingers had intertwined beneath the table. Her head shot up in surprise, but Arnold feigned ignorance as he carried on his impersonal exchange with the knight. Their linked fingers were like a secret, out of sight.

But there's someone else right there!

Hyper-focused on their hands, she forgot her fear. A covert touch like this was bad for her heart. She tried to slip out of his grasp, but Arnold squeezed her fingers tighter. His voice, meanwhile, betrayed nothing. Rishe's ears grew hot as she listened to him, enduring their clandestine hand-holding.

"That's our new schedule for tomorrow. Make sure everyone hears."

"Of course. Excuse me, Your Highness." The knight bowed and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Had the knight thought it strange that Rishe's and Arnold's chairs were so close and that dinner hadn't been served? Rishe had all sorts of new worries now—especially the state of her hand.

"P-Prince Arnold..."

"Hmm?" came Arnold's soft response as he thumbed Rishe's ring finger.

"Thank you for holding my hand. But, um, erm..."

Arnold's other hand propped up his chin as he looked down at the ring he'd given her. "You're always wearing this nowadays."

"W-well, it's important to me!" Rishe stammered. It was the truth, but it felt awkward to have it pointed out to her.

I thought Prince Arnold had no interest in what I wear.

Had he also noticed her ogling the gem's surface, admiring the sapphire every time light passed through it? The thought made her want to bury herself in the castle's foundations.

"So the metalwork was wrought by an artisan from Coyolles, eh? You take care of it well for how detailed the craftsmanship is."

"Your Highness, *please!*"

"What?" Arnold looked down, running his finger over the ring. What did he think about her bright-red face? She wanted to know, but

she couldn't bring herself to ask him.

Rishe marshaled her courage and changed tack. "We should hurry and eat! Since Prince Curtis has already eaten, you must hurry and have dinner before meeting him!"

Arnold chuckled and gently removed his hand from Rishe's. "I guess we should. You've stopped trembling, at least."

You guess?!

Much as she wanted to berate him, calming her pounding heart took priority. She drew in a breath, seeking strength, and rang the bell to summon the kitchen staff.

Rishe stayed by Arnold's side all through their meal, then did some more work after dinner. She accompanied him to his office and, while Arnold handled some paperwork, sat beside him and continued her wedding preparations. Her task for the day was confirming the final list of invitees.

One letter from Rishe's homeland bore a name she'd rather not have seen, and her face soured. At the very least, she was happy to read many of the other RSVPs. She'd gotten a letter from Zahad, whom she would be meeting for the first time in this life but whom she had been very close to in another one. There was a response from the king of the country Rishe had served in her life as a knight too. She might be able to see some of her fellow knights if they attended.

Arnold, on the other hand, only looked annoyed at the list of guests.

Finishing her work with a strained smile, Rishe set off for the most difficult task of the day. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go take a bath!"

After a beat, Arnold nodded, wearing just the sort of frown she expected. "Right."

"Er, please come get me later. I'm going to pretend to sleep in my bedroom to fool the maids!"

"I'll be there no matter what happens, so don't worry. Are you

going to be okay in the bath, though?”

“Normally I go in by myself, but I’ll say I’m tired from my escorting duties and have my maids help me...”

Arnold’s expression turned awkward. “I see,” he said simply.

It pained her to lie to her maids, but she couldn’t let word get out that she was sleeping with the prince—then *everyone* would find out she was afraid of ghosts! For Arnold’s part, he’d only explained things to Oliver.

“Pardon us, Lady Rishe. We’re here to escort you to the bath.”

“Yes, I’m coming!” Rishe pumped herself up and left the office after giving Arnold a parting look. Then she headed with her maids to one of several bathrooms in the castle.

“Thank you so much for what you did before, Lady Rishe.”

“Everyone’s calmed down since you told us there’s no such thing as ghosts!”

“Oh, um, splendid! You should all go to bed nice and early tonight, then.”

Rishe walked down the halls, conversing with her maids. Along the way, she spotted a large group of people.

It’s Lady Harriet!

The third floor was connected to the building where the guest rooms were located. Right where the hall joined the two buildings together, Harriet stared out a window, her maids standing behind her.

Rishe glided over to her side and peered out the window, where the docks glowed in the light of the moon. “Good evening. It’s a beautiful moonlit night, isn’t it?”

Harriet nearly jumped out of her skin. “Ack!”

“That small vessel belongs to Siguel, doesn’t it? Oh! That carriage cresting the hill there must be carrying your brother! I’m so glad he arrived safely.”

“Urgh... Yes, thank you.” Harriet hung her head and peeked at Rishe through her hair. The long curtain of her bangs still hid her eyes, so it was hard for Rishe to read her expressions, but she didn’t seem displeased by Rishe’s presence. Harriet looked back out the window and murmured, “Troette’s moonlit hill...”

The words rang familiar enough.

Aha! Considering where she's originally from, I can see why she'd make the reference. Rishe smiled wryly, feeling complicated. *I didn't want to use this strategy, but it's a sure shortcut to bonding with Lady Harriet.*

"Right, the final scene in the Claudiette Saga," she said, and Harriet's head whipped up. "You were referring to the scene where the princess's carriage traverses the moonlit hill, right?"

"Y-you've read it?! It was just published last month on the western continent, though!"

"Yes. I sent for a copy after hearing of its popularity."

This was a bald-faced lie. She'd read the book in Siguel—just one book among the countless in the country of writing—in her fifth life.

"It's a wonderful story, isn't it? I could perfectly picture the scene where the hero, Gene, makes his triumphant return."

"Precisely! I know *just* what you mean. Each scene was so rich with detail, and the story had such exciting twists and turns! Um, if it wouldn't be an imposition, could I ask which character you liked best, Lady Rishe?"

"That's a difficult question. I did love Gene, but I suppose I was most interested in his mentor..."

"General Craig!" Rishe and Harriet said at the same time.

From a slight distance, the maids gaped at them.

Harriet's cheeks flushed as she professed, "I-I love him too! A master of the blade who seems cold but gives the hero the exact advice he needs and watches over him from afar!"

"You felt secure every time he appeared in a scene. I loved reading his conversations with Gene."

"Yes! And, um, I'm sure the sequel will go into the general's past! I-I'm looking forward to it so much, knowing he'll be in it again!"

Rishe chose her words carefully, a pleasant smile plastered on her face. *Mm-hmm, I was just as naive as you once. Who could've imagined the general would die protecting the main character in the next volume?*

Thanks to her loops, Rishe knew the future. That meant she also knew spoilers for works of fiction that hadn't yet been written in this life. She had to be careful not to let those slip into her conversation

with Harriet.

Once you know what happens down the line, you can never return to blissful ignorance! Ugh, I wanted to avoid talking about a work that's still in progress with someone who loves reading so much...

Yet this seemed like the only topic that could put Harriet at ease. Just as Rishe suspected, Harriet was now much more relaxed than before.

In a tiny voice, the princess said, "I-I'm so happy. In Fabrannia, I'm told only to read practical texts, not fiction..."

"How long have you been staying in Fabrannia ahead of your marriage, Lady Harriet?"

"A year and a half."

"My, that long? Has it been a year and a half since you saw your brother, then?"

"Y-yes! I'm sure my brother has read the Claudiette Saga as well, so I was looking forward to discussing it with him." Harriet took a deep breath to steel herself. "Um, Lady Rishe...thank you so much for letting me see my family."

Harriet's voice was no louder than a squeak. Her maids, still at a distance, hadn't even heard it. The princess had probably intended that as she continued, "I-I don't mean anything strange by that! But, if not for your wedding, Lady Rishe, I don't think I'd be able to see my brother until my own wedding. It's not until next year, which seems so far away..."

"You never went home once during your stay in Fabrannia, Lady Harriet? Fabrannia and Siguel aren't that far away, are they?"

"I-I may only be engaged now, but it's Fabrannia's royal family I'm marrying into. It would be shameful to return home for anything but a wedding or a funeral." Rishe blinked in surprise, so Harriet hurried to add, "Er, I just don't want to be a burden! I've already been learning for a year and a half and I'm still useless."

"That's not true, Lady Harriet."

"No, it is! And a political marriage is the only thing left for a useless princess!" Harriet clapped her dainty hands over her bangs. "I was born and nursed on the tax money of my people. If I'm not of some use to my country, there's no reason for me to be *alive*, let alone having

ever been born!”

Looking closer, Rishe realized that Harriet was trembling. “Lady Harriet, you...”

“I need to be better... I need to be better!” Those words were so quiet, she must’ve meant them for only herself to hear.

She thinks she can only fulfill her duty by being a pawn in a political marriage. The idea struck a chord with Rishe. *I used to feel the same way about myself.*

If that was the case, then there was nothing Rishe could say to counter it. If one didn’t find their own possibilities within themselves, their aspirations would be forever out of reach. Right now, any other options were unrealistic for Harriet, like stories written by someone else. Rishe offered consoling words instead.

“The carriage has passed the castle gates, Lady Harriet.”

Wordlessly, Harriet looked out the window. The carriage came to a halt, and a man stepped out. His golden hair was a match for Harriet’s, but cut short, and he was tall and slender. His clothes were simple yet high-quality—a formal outfit completed with a cape. The man looked up and smiled in relief when he spotted Harriet.

“Curtis,” Harriet breathed.

Rishe’s eyes locked on those of the man beside the carriage. She could see his face quite clearly, even in the distance, thanks to the bright light of the moon.

Ahh. I see what’s going on here.

His eyes were ruby red.

That’s not Prince Curtis.

Chapter 2

THE LEADER OF RISHE'S HUNTING TROOP in her fifth life always had an ambiguous smile on his face. At around twenty years old—though no one knew if that was his real age—he was good-looking and tall, yet not tall enough to stand out. His choppy hair was a common chestnut brown, made so by a specially concocted dye that damaged his true orange-blond hair (although he passed it off as “natural frizz”). He often stared at people with his almond-shaped eyes, yet he knew just when to break it, ever skirting the line between friendly and overfamiliar. All these traits made him popular with women, but he had too many secrets and there was no sincerity in any of his relationships.

“Me? Oh, I don’t love any of them. You’re cute as always, though, Rishe.”

He often made flippant comments like that with a completely insincere smile. But the flippancy wasn’t just reserved for hitting on Rishe; he issued ridiculous orders to his men with the same tone—the same unknowable, casual cheer.

“The prey has noticed we’re circling it? Well, no matter. It’s an easy hunt at this point. Just finish it off before it escapes, and we win.”

In contrast to his frivolous attitude, he was unbelievably passionate about his work. He used many names, never his real one. Among Rishe and his troop, he called himself “Raul.”

Upon returning to their small hut and spotting Raul sitting up in bed, Rishe cried, “Raul! You’re not planning on hunting in that state, are you?”

Her companions were all at a loss.

Raul shrugged, his tone put-upon. “What was that, Rishe? We’re practically family, so I expect you to say ‘I’m home!’ when you come in, all right?”

“Don’t change the subject! You have a cracked rib! You’re in no condition to move!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. That painkiller you gave me is working. I feel like I can do anything right now.” Raul smiled, shrugging on his usual

hunting jacket. “That’s our goddess of luck! Always getting better with a bow, at home in the woods like you were born here, and you can make medicine too! Picking you up five years ago was the correct decision.”

“Raul. Painkillers are for getting restful sleep, not for pushing yourself when you shouldn’t be.”

“I’ll get better if you give me a little pep talk.”

“You’ll get a little back talk instead if you don’t get in that bed.”

For some reason, it tickled Raul to have Rishe glaring at him.

“Listen here, Raul—”

“But it’s such good game! I can’t just wait here when prey like that is easy pickings.” His smile was as flippant as ever, but his eyes held sincerity for once. “I know I don’t look it, but I’m very loyal to the Sigel royal family.”

Those eyes of his burned bright red.

Rishe ran a loving hand down the spines of a book stack and exclaimed, “I didn’t think Prince Curtis would bring so many books!”

She and Arnold were seated on a couch in the newly prepared southern room on the fourth floor. They had both already bathed and donned their bedclothes. Even Arnold, who went around with his neck covered most of the time, sported a light, buttonless shirt that exposed his collarbones. They were having a cup of bedtime tea and inspecting the gifts Curtis had presented them.

“Look, Your Highness! Even the small details on the cover are so neatly printed!” Rishe gushed, smiling brightly.

“Yeah.” Arnold’s reply was indifferent. At a glance, he seemed uninterested in the gifts, but he had a book in hand as well. If he truly had no interest in them, he wouldn’t have picked one up.

I’m figuring him out little by little, Rishe thought confidently.

Flipping the pages of the book in his hands, Arnold said, “They’re in pristine condition despite being transported by ship.”

“The paper is specially made for easy storage. It’s so intriguing—

you can tell how advanced Siguel's bookmaking technology is just by holding one!"

Rishe's focus left the volumes, drifting to the young man they'd met earlier. *The Prince Curtis visiting us is a fake, though.*

She thought back to the quick meeting they'd held in a reception room about an hour earlier. Since he'd arrived late at night, they'd kept it to a simple greeting and presentation of gifts. But no matter how short their interaction was, it was plenty of time to confirm Rishe's suspicions.

"I am Siguel's eldest prince, Curtis Samuel O'Fallon."

He'd been a little meek, but the man's greeting was without error, and his reserved smile was spot-on. Even the prince's smallest gestures had been recreated to resemble the Curtis Rishe knew, down to the shortest eyelash.

He looks just like Prince Curtis, and his voice is a perfect match too. This is Prince Arnold's first time meeting him, so there's no way for Galkhein to catch on to the deception...at least, there shouldn't be.

Rishe could tell, however. It wasn't in his portrait, but the real Curtis's eyes were a light olive green.

That man is Raul. I'm sure of it.

When he saw Rishe in the reception room, Raul made no show of recognizing her. Even so, she was certain he'd made the connection between Arnold's fiancée and Harriet's "guard," whom he'd exchanged blows with in that alley.

Why is Raul pretending to be Prince Curtis? Does Lady Harriet know about this? Did something happen to the real prince?

"Your Highness, where in town did you go today?" she asked Arnold. One of the things she was still trying to figure out was Arnold's motive for coming here.

Turning a page, Arnold responded, "I visited a few currency exchanges."

Coastal countries often had currency exchanges in the port towns. There, travelers and merchants could trade money from their homeland for the local currency.

"Most trading vessels from the western continent exchange

currency in this town. If you ask around at the exchanges, you can find out which western countries are trading the most money.”

“And thus, which countries to pursue diplomatic relations with,” Rishe noted.

“Fabrannia’s still winning over Siguel at this point.”

Although Arnold was being a little mean-spirited about it, Rishe was interested in what he had to say. Evidently, there wasn’t much difference between the mind of a merchant and that of a politician.

“Reports of this nature are easy to falsify. It’s worth going in person to get direct reports every so often.”

That was obvious enough to Rishe, so she fell into thought for a moment. *There’s no way that’s the only reason he’s here. Until I know the full extent of Prince Arnold’s aims, I can’t share anything about Siguel so freely. I’m sure Raul’s not out to harm Galkhein, but still.*

This was the perfect opportunity for Siguel to get on friendly terms with the powerful Galkhein. It was hard to imagine that Raul would hinder such relations from forming, since he was loyal to Siguel’s royal family.

If that’s the case, then does it have something to do with Lady Harriet? Or perhaps something really did happen to Prince Curtis?

As her mind spun, Arnold raised his head from his book and stared at her. Rishe’s thoughts ground to a halt when she noticed his gaze. His blue eyes seemed to read her very soul.

“I-Is something the matter, Your Highness?”

The prince lifted his hand from the page and stroked Rishe’s hair. “You’ve got your hair tied even though you’re about to go to sleep.”

Indeed, Rishe had bound her coral hair in a loose braid. It went over her shoulder rather than down her back. Rishe had often braided her hair in her fifth loop. When wielding a bow and donning a hood on a hunting trip, she found this to be the most convenient hairstyle.

“I was just thinking about the past.”

“Oh?” He ran his hand down her braid like he was playing with a cat’s tail. When his fingers reached the chiffon ribbon at the end, he gave it a gentle tug.

“Hey!” Rishe fumbled to keep the braid from coming undone, but

Arnold grabbed her hand first and her hair unfurled in waves. It was fine, since she was just going to bed, but it still felt awkward for Arnold to play with her hair so shamelessly.

Rishe pouted at him. "You're like a little boy playing a prank."

Arnold smiled back down at her. "You might be right," he said with a chuckle. Then his fingers began to comb her hair.

She found herself genuinely floored by his tenderness. The more his fingers brushed her hair, the more flustered she grew. "Um, Your Highness, I..."

"Yes?"

"I-I'm going to bed!" Rishe sprang to her feet and gripped Arnold's hand. "Y-you should get to bed too, Your Highness! We've got a lot to do tomorrow, and you must be tired from traveling here!"

She thought Arnold would have a response ready, but he just shut his book and stood from the couch. Rishe made for her bed, relieved.

The two beds were about fifty centimeters apart, with a side table wedged in between. Arnold had naturally gravitated to the bed by the window because Rishe said the crashing of the waves would scare her at night. She appreciated his consideration.

"I'm putting out the lamp," he told her.

"All right. Good night."

Arnold paused, as if unaccustomed to the phrase. A moment later, he returned her words in a soft voice. "Good night."

The moon was very bright that night. Even after the lamp went out and the curtains were closed, Rishe could still see Arnold's faint outline in the darkness.

Wearing a little frown, she turned onto her side and murmured, "I apologize for making you join me, Your Highness."

Arnold faced her. "It's fine. Better than forcing you to sleep by yourself when you're so afraid."

Rishe's heart did a little somersault in her chest.

"Should I send more maids your way?" he asked, and the question caught her off guard. She blinked in Arnold's direction as he continued, "Oliver offered me some advice when I was picking your potential maids. He said it would be better for you if I hired older women from

noble houses rather than young commoners.”

It was Rishe who had decided to hire Elsie and her other maids, but Arnold was the one who had created the original list of candidates.

“Why did you put together the list you did, Prince Arnold?”

The prince turned back to the ceiling and closed his eyes—perhaps in deliberation. “I didn’t want you to be alone in that palace.”

Rishe’s lashes fluttered as she blinked again, and he went on, “Normally, the crown princess should have maids of a fitting status. But if I chose the wrong noble ladies, I thought they might be condescending to you because of the size of your country.”

Compared to Galkhein, Rishe’s home country was minuscule. Moreover, she had come to Galkhein as a *hostage*. At that first party she attended, there were quite a few noble ladies who had been condescending to her indeed.

“I thought it would be safer to employ commoners with no social status. Thankfully, we already had some daughters of fallen nobility in our employ. It wasn’t hard to hire commoners who have a reputation for diligence.”

He must be talking about Diana. It was her hard work that allowed Arnold to hire Elsie and the rest.

“I also didn’t think you were the type to care about the status of those around you. So I thought I’d surround you with inexperienced girls about your age, ladies you wouldn’t feel reserved around.” Arnold’s eyes opened, and he looked at Rishe again. “Apparently, you feel the need to protect girls like that.”

“Urk!” He was no doubt referring to her brave facade against ghosts for her maids. “So you thought you should hire more maids for me?”

“That’s right. I should have given you at least a few older - servants.” He sounded almost apologetic.

Wrapping her arms around the second pillow on her bed, Rishe told him, “I think you still would have ended up sleeping in this room even if I had some older maids, Your Highness.”

“Why’s that?”

Rishe pressed her mouth into the pillow in her arms and

mumbled, “Because I can’t seem to show this side of myself to anyone but you lately, Prince Arnold...”

Even in the dark, Arnold looked surprised. Rishe sat bolt upright in bed when she realized what she’d said.

“Oh! Uh, I’m not saying I can’t trust anyone other than you! I find all my maids and the knights and Oliver very encouraging! And Prince Theodore helps me out all the time too! It’s just that...” As she spoke, she sank back down onto the bed. “For some reason, you’re the only one I want to ask for these sorts of favors.”

Try as she might, Rishe couldn’t explain it. Surely all those other people would help her if she asked, but most mysteriously, she couldn’t bring herself to confide in them.

“I think... I think it’s because you’re better with a sword than anyone else in the world.”

Arnold loosed an amused laugh. “I guess I should give your knights more training before I hire additional maids, then.”

“W-well, now that you say that, I can’t say that has anything to do with it either, so—” Rishe stopped short, gasping. “Wait, did you really order your knights to guard me?”

There were always two guards with Rishe out of a six-person rotation. They had once belonged to Arnold’s Imperial Guards, so they must have had different duties before Rishe arrived. Arnold had also recently sent some of his knights to Coyolles. He was supposed to have some fifty Imperial Guards, a rather small number for the crown prince of such a large nation. Rishe found it strange that so many of them were assigned to her when there were fewer and fewer of them available lately.

Arnold’s expression was merry. “What, you think they’re there to keep an eye on you?”

“I escape their sight far too often for that to be the case.”

Normally, it wouldn’t have made sense to assign exclusive guards to someone who stayed inside the palace all day, so Rishe always thought that her “guards” were really there to report her movements to Arnold. Only now did she realize that wasn’t the case. Arnold had told her that he didn’t want her to be alone in the palace, where Theodore said his brother had enemies aplenty...

“Prince Arnold, you don’t need to go so far for my sake.”

“I know that you can protect yourself,” Arnold said. “They’re there to *show* anyone who sees you that I’m protecting you with my own Imperial Guards.”

His voice was quiet but clear. What he left unsaid was that he considered the palace to be enemy territory.

“Come to think of it, you ordered the knights to step up security, didn’t you?” Arnold changed the subject and Rishe gulped. “What was it? ‘Put strings with bells up in the hallways’? If there are any intruders, they’ll trip on the strings and ring the bells. Despite how scared you were, you’re still taking rational action, I see.”

It was just as Arnold said. Rishe wasn’t enduring her fear in silence—she was enduring her fear *while* asking the knights for assistance. If she thought rationally about the ghost situation, the maids had most likely seen a living person.

“Look, just...don’t tell me what comes of them!”

“You don’t want to know?”

“Well, if we set traps and the bells don’t ring, then that means there’s a good chance it’s a ghost after all, right?!”

Arnold narrowed his eyes. “I’d think you’d want to know if we caught someone with it.”

“In that case, until I receive such a report, I’ll be worrying that it really was a ghost.”

She preferred to know that, no matter what happened, she wouldn’t be notified of the results.

Besides, if what they saw wasn’t a ghost or a normal person, the bells aren’t going to ring anyway!

The prince looked skeptical, but at length he sighed and said, “Well, so be it. In the event of an emergency, I will respond to it myself.”

Prince Arnold doesn’t even believe in ghosts, but he doesn’t dismiss my fear... He still takes me seriously.

That reassured Rishe more than anything else.

“Thank you, Your Highness. I only hope I’m able to be of use myself.”

It was then that Harriet's words echoed in her mind: *"If I'm not of some use to my country, there's no reason for me to be alive, let alone having ever been born!"*

Arnold's response was soft and sweet. "There's no need for that. Hurry and sleep before the clouds hide the moon and it gets even darker."

"Yes."

"Is the crashing of the waves scary?"

A gentle drowsiness came over her as she answered, "Not with you here..."

The Prince Arnold with me right now is nothing like the Emperor Arnold Hein of the future... The Princess Harriet of this loop is the same...

Rishe's thoughts quieted as she fell asleep at last.

The next day, Rishe and Arnold got ready and went to meet with "Curtis" once more. After breakfast, Arnold escorted Rishe to the guest lounge, where she came face-to-face with him again.

"Thank you for your warm greeting last night despite the late hour of my arrival."

"We're just glad you made it here safe and sound. It's a small castle, but we'll do everything we can to ensure your stay is comfortable."

"I appreciate your consideration. From the bottom of my heart, truly—thank you, Prince Arnold."

Curtis made a perfect show of conversing with Arnold. His short blond hair was smoothed down with minimal product, and he conducted himself with decorum and geniality. Even his smile had the troubled edge of the real Prince Curtis. Yet he couldn't disguise the color of his eyes.

Lady Harriet must have noticed as well. Rishe glanced at the other woman, but she was hanging her head just as deeply as always.

"By the way, I happened to hear that we've burdened Her Future

Highness quite terribly.” Raul-disguised-as-Curtis regarded Rishe with a wry smile. “I brought female knights over from Siguel, so you needn’t serve as my sister’s guard any longer. Thank you so much for protecting my sister yesterday, Lady Rishe.”

“Think nothing of it. I very much appreciated the opportunity to spend time with Lady Harriet.”

“Still, it must be said that we put you in a dangerous position. I do hope you weren’t in any danger yourself yesterday.”

As a matter of fact, she *had* been in danger. And the one who had put her in that danger was Raul, who sat before her right now. Rishe put on her brightest smile and told him, “There was no danger whatsoever, Prince Curtis.”

He responded with a look of piqued interest. He still wore the same gentle smile, but Rishe could sense the curiosity in his gaze. Even that look made him resemble the real Curtis so much, it awed Rishe.

“I was surprised to hear a duke’s daughter like yourself has some sword training.”

“Oh, I’m just a novice, really. I have plenty more training ahead of me.”

“I’m sure you’re just being humble. Would you permit me to kneel before you and give you a proper display of my gratitude?”

Rishe guessed Raul’s aim. The “display” he meant was to kiss the back of Rishe’s hand. Kyle had done the same to her when they’d met in this life, as was custom in Coyolles, but there was no such custom in Siguel.

He wants to touch my hand to determine my proficiency with a sword.

Perhaps he suspected her of being a body double for the crown princess as well. She didn’t want to reveal too much to Raul, but she couldn’t turn down such a gesture from a “prince.” Having no other choice, Rishe began to nod, when...

Eep!

A hand snaked around her waist, and Rishe almost squeaked aloud. She clapped a hand over her mouth and looked up to see Arnold standing next to her. “Goodness, Prince Arnold...”

Arnold’s eyes were cold as ice as he pulled Rishe toward him. He

stared Raul down frigidly and said, "You're an honored guest. It may just be a formal greeting, but there's no need for you to kneel."

"My, my." Raul narrowed his eyes, smile widening. "I see you're quite the devoted husband, Prince Arnold."

Where in the world did that come from?!

The comment had to be sarcastic, but Arnold did not flinch. He just gazed at Raul, his actions unprovoked but clearly deliberate.

"It's only natural for a husband to mind his wife."

"I'd heard it was a political union, but I see you care a great deal for your fiancée. That's wonderful."

"Um, excuse me?" Rishe's head swung between the two of them, trying to parse their conversation. Then Arnold broke eye contact as if he'd lost interest.

"I'm sure you're tired from the long journey, Prince Curtis. I plan to guide you around town tomorrow, so please retire for today."

Hmm, looks like Prince Arnold and Raul will be parting ways for now.

She still had no idea as to either of their motives, but Rishe was on Galkhein's side at the moment. Even if she wasn't going to tell Arnold that Curtis was a fake, she still planned on being cautious around him.

When she looked up, she was met with Arnold's blue eyes. Her breath caught a little at the proximity of his handsome face.

Arnold bent down, face neutral, and whispered, "Sorry, but please entertain the princess."

His husky voice and breath tickled her ear, making her jump. Rishe nodded, trying to hide her jitters.

"Since Prince Curtis is staying behind, I'll tighten security inside the castle. I want you to let me know if there are any problems."

This was likely his way of telling her that he would be watching Raul too. He had caught on to what she wanted to tell him without her having to voice it. Rishe decided to focus on the mission she'd been given in the meantime.

"Lady Harriet." She smiled as she addressed the woman hiding behind Raul. "It seems I won't be your escort any longer, but I was still hoping we could talk today. Do you mind if I join you?"

“Huh?! B-but—” Harriet scuttled backward, her voice cracking. “I- I couldn’t possibly, I mean, *you* couldn’t possibly, with someone like me! I’ll just sit still someplace where I won’t get in anyone’s way, so, um, please don’t feel the need to take pity on me! I—”

“I was hoping we could talk about books, Lady Harriet...”

“R-really?!” Harriet’s head whipped up, then drooped just as quickly. “I-If it wouldn’t be a bother, then, um, I...”

“Wonderful! If you don’t mind, then allow me.”

As Rishe moved things along, Harriet seemed to shrink ever deeper into herself.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Princess Harriet. I am Kaine Tully, head of the Aria Trading Company.”

“Er, right...”

Tully introduced himself with a brilliant smile in the reception room. He liked to grow out his facial hair, but he was clean-shaven today. He’d also garbed himself in black robes that complemented his dark skin and matched his image as a first-rate merchant. Rishe was surprised by the sight of her former employer.

There was a rich spread of first-class goods in the room, but they weren’t all luxury products. Among them were mature pieces of jewelry and cute lace accessories, alluring semi-transparent shawls, and brightly colored shoes that boosted one’s spirits.

Such variety was impressive. Rishe had requested Tully’s presence on short notice, soon after it was decided she would accompany Arnold on this trip. Tully would’ve had only a small window of time to prepare and transport goods befitting the occasion.

“Your Highness, please feel free to browse our wares! Let us introduce what we have in store today.”

“Eep!”

One of the company salesmen gave Harriet a rundown of the products on display while paying no heed to her shriek. Harriet’s head maid nodded approvingly from behind her.

Watching them out of the corner of his eye, Tully made a great show of bowing to Rishe. “Now then, Lady Rishe. Let us commence with our usual business.”

“Mr. Tully, why do I always find myself asking you to be less formal with me?”

Tully laughed good-naturedly and took out several documents. “Bah, don’t be that way. I’m in grand spirits as of late. I have interesting business deals, and my sister’s health is much better.”

“I’m happy to hear it. Aria’s doing well, then?”

“Yep, and it’s all thanks to you. So, my lady, it hardly suffices to show my appreciation, but please accept the information you requested of me.”

He handed over the documents with a theatrical reverence, and Rishe smirked as she accepted them. When she saw the contents, her hand flew to her mouth in surprise. “Wow. I can’t believe you obtained all this so precisely!”

“Does it please you?”

“This column on the right is how recently these were all acquired, yes? The oldest is from half a year ago, and the most recent is from last month?”

“That’s right. You can see the differences in the numbers. Do you see how intel from the west comes in slower?”

“Yes. Does this third sheet contain your information sources?”

“For the official data, yes. There is also some unofficial data I could share with you.”

The conversation flowed without the real need for details. Once Rishe had finished checking over the third sheet, Tully chuckled.

“What is it, Mr. Tully?”

“Nothing, just...you catch on quick. It feels like I’m talking to somebody who works for me.”

That’s because I used to do just that!

Rishe’s quick analytical eye had been honed by Tully himself in her first life. The information Tully put together was always partially coded to help prevent leaks, but it was easy to parse if one knew the code.

"This information will be very useful indeed. I swear I won't misuse it."

"See that you don't. I trust you, though."

Rishe nodded, and Tully grinned at her in satisfaction. Then he glanced at the other side of the room. "I suppose we should do something about *that* now."

Tully gestured with his chin at Harriet, who was busy fretting over the goods, and the head maid fiendishly watching over her.

"This simply won't do, Your Highness! Need I remind you that His Majesty bade you spend your money as you pleased in Galkhein? Being frugal will only embarrass him! You were given Galkhein currency, so you must spend it while you are here!"

"I-I'm sorry!" Harriet minimized herself as she bore the head maid's furious tirade.

"Man, what a waste," Tully grumbled. "That maid would be the picture of dignity if she just kept her mouth shut."

"Watch it, Mr. Tully."

"Hey, don't give me that look! That princess is covering her face with her hair too. Her dress might be good quality, but it's also old and out of season." Tully narrowed his eyes, stroking his smooth chin. "Hey, isn't that fabric no longer exported from the country that produces it?"

"You noticed it too, did you?"

"You're keen yourself. Old things aren't necessarily bad, but..."

Rishe eyed Harriet. "Do you suppose she hides her face to protect herself?"

Tully cracked his neck. "Looks more like a cage to me."

So it's meant to trap her from within rather than shield her from without?

"Apologies, Mr. Tully, but could you handle the head maid?"

"Very well! My lady, could I interest *you* in any of these items?"

"Huh?! Oh, no, not me." The head maid soundly rejected Tully, but he was unperturbed.

"It seems the items I brought with me today weren't to Her Highness's liking. I'll be back tomorrow, so I thought maybe you could

give me an idea of what she'd prefer."

"Well, erm, I suppose I could..."

Tully shot a knowing glance at Rishe, and she silently offered her thanks. Then she approached Harriet.

"Was there nothing that caught your eye, Lady Harriet?"

Harriet hesitated a moment before her head shot up. "N-no! It's not that I didn't like everything, it's just..."

Rishe's eyes widened when she heard the quiver in Harriet's voice. *What's she so afraid of?* The princess was only being scolded by the head maid, so maybe that was why, but that didn't seem right to Rishe. *Is she afraid of spending money? No, that can't be it.*

"I'm sure the dresses and jewelry would think they could do better than me." Harriet's head sank lower and lower as Rishe racked her brain for an explanation. "I may be human, but I'm absolutely not in a position to choose dresses myself..."

"What are you saying, Lady Harriet?"

"I don't choose the dresses, they choose me... I may have been born human, but I'm in no position to turn something down. I-I'm so sorry..." She curled in on herself as much as possible before murmuring, "I wish I could just be a real doll..."

"A doll, Your Highness?"

Harriet flinched. She must have said the words without intending for Rishe to hear. "My mother told me...as a princess, my job is to enter into a political marriage and give my husband an heir...and to do that, I must become an adorable girl just like a doll that my husband will love..."

Rishe frowned at those words, a memory picking at her mind.

"B-but as you can see, I'm human. I can't do anything right, and people get annoyed just looking at me. Even my face makes people hate me because of the way my eyes look." Harriet bowed her head, her face in her hands. "I do everything wrong! The best I can do is just stay out of people's way..."

"Oh, Lady Harriet."

"I can't make people uncomfortable with my face. I can't show it. I can't speak," she said as if in chant, a melancholy mantra meant only

for herself.

Watching her, Rishe gently asked, “Is that why you hide your face?”

“Ah! If I show him my face, His Majesty might break off our engagement. That’s the one thing I must avoid. This political marriage is the whole reason I was born.” Harriet sounded like she was about to cry, but she still managed to speak coherently. “I must fulfill my role as a doll in this marriage...”

It seemed those words were all she had to cling to. And something about them was familiar to Rishe.

“I must finish this all before tomorrow...”

When Rishe was young, her “education” was everything. Her parents had been strict, ensuring she knew that there was no way out of her lessons. All sorts of tutors visited her home and taught her from morning to night, and when she was alone, she had additional work to complete. Since every day of her life was like that, she couldn’t recall spending a single evening with her parents. She spent time alone in her room, slept alone in her bed, and when she woke up, a full day of education for a future queen began.

There was an ever-growing mountain of things to learn, and Rishe was always desperately telling herself, *“I need to be able to do this... I need to study properly!”*

It was no different on her sixth birthday, the thirtieth day of the seventh month. The lights in the main house were out. Everyone was already sleeping, and Rishe was alone—again. It was nearly midnight, and no one had celebrated her birthday with her, but that was only natural because she was behind in her studies. She wanted to cry when she thought about it, but she also felt that crying was shameful, so instead, she chanted to herself again and again:

“I couldn’t be born a boy...so I at least must become the queen. If I don’t, there was no...” She remembered her pen stalling as she rubbed at her eyes. *“There was no point in me being born...”*

Back in the present, Rishe closed her eyes. She took a deep breath and then slapped her hands together with a loud *crack!*

“Ack!”

“I’m sorry, Lady Harriet.” Ignoring Harriet’s yelp, she smiled and

asked, "Would you mind accompanying me for a little while?"

"Huh?"

Things moved at a frantic pace after that. Rishe asked Elsie to take care of things, requested Tully to visit again tomorrow, changed her dress, and headed outside. Dodging the head maid and her suggestions, Rishe took Harriet's hand with a big smile on her face, then brought her to just the place she'd planned on.

The back of a horse.

"Eeeek!"

Seated behind Harriet in the saddle, Rishe held the reins with her arms around the princess and took the horse over a grassy hill.

Sitting sidesaddle, Harriet gripped the pommel. Her body shook as she spluttered, "I-I'm riding on...a horse!"

"Women don't ride horses on the western continent, do they?" Rishe asked sunnily as the horse plodded along. "I wanted to take you to the cape, but it rained this morning, you see. A carriage would get its wheels stuck in the muck, and it's too high up, so I thought we'd take a horse."

"W-women ride horses together on this continent?!"

"Oh, no! Even here, women don't usually hold the reins. You'd normally ride with a man in a similar fashion as you are now, Lady Harriet. It's hard to ride in a dress, after all," Rishe said with a bright smile on her face.

Harriet's mouth flapped open and closed like a fish, her ears flushed scarlet. The princess kept her grip on the saddle, but strangely, she also ceased to tremble. She sat tall in front of Rishe, her eyes darting around at the scenery.

Is Lady Harriet enjoying this too?

Rishe continued her explanation with a confident grin. She took one hand from the reins and lifted her skirt to show Harriet. "The dress I'm wearing right now has a slit in it, so I can straddle a horse. I have enough on underneath it that I don't need to worry about it flipping open."

"L-Lady Rishe, Princess Harriet!" The head maid was trailing

behind them on foot. She clapped a hand to her forehead and exclaimed, "I thought perhaps I should let it go as a matter of diplomacy, but I've decided I must speak up! It's not too late! This is far too unladylike, you two! We can ready a carriage for you, so get down from that horse immediately!"

Harriet flinched, and Rishe turned around. The rest of Harriet's maids seemed to be of the same opinion. Even the lady knights from Siguel were eyeing Rishe warily.

The way Harriet hung her head seemed regretful to Rishe. She bent over and put one of her hands on Harriet's where it held the saddle. "Lady Harriet."

"Yes?!"

She wrapped Harriet's arm around her waist and whispered into her bright-red ear, "I'm going to shake them off... Hold tight."

"Huh?!"

She grasped the reins once more and, in time with the chestnut horse's breathing, urged the steed onward.

"Aiiieeee!"

Scream though Harriet did, the dutiful horse made sure she was holding on before racing up the hill before them.

"I apologize, Miss Head Maid!" Rishe called back. "I'll take your scolding later—me and only me, if you would!"

The head maid shouted something in response, but her words were stolen by the breeze.

Harriet remained hunched at the start, but she gradually lifted her head. "W-wow! We're already all the way up here..."

The cape that had been far in the distance just a moment ago was already right before their eyes.

"There was a horseback-riding scene in the Claudiette Saga as well, wasn't there? It had the most wonderful illustration. The moment I turned the page, I was transfixed. It's Siguel's special bookmaking technology that allows the printing of such fine lines, isn't it?"

Hearing praise of her homeland made Harriet bashful. Timidity in every move, she ventured a peek behind them. "Everyone's so far away..."

A grove of trees up on the cape cast a pleasant, dappled shade. Rishe brought the horse into the trees before dismounting and offering her hand to Harriet. After helping the princess down, she patted the horse's neck and tied its reins to a tree to let it rest.

"The sea breeze is so nice and cool, isn't it?"

Harriet nodded, letting out a captivated sigh as she gazed at the scenery. From the cape, the seaside town looked vibrant, bathed in sunlight. The deep blue sea spread out before them. Above, white sea birds flew about.

"You can go anywhere you want, can't you, Lady Rishe?"

Rishe watched Harriet, holding down her hair as it fluttered in the wind.

"How I wish I could be like you..." Harriet trailed off, then gasped and shook her head violently. "I-I-I'm sorry! I, er, shouldn't presume! How disrespectful of me!"

"You can't become me, Lady Harriet," Rishe said with a bittersweet smile. "I'm sure the places I go aren't the places *you* want to go."

"I, um..."

"Where is it that you want to go, Lady Harriet?"

Harriet sucked in a breath like she'd never heard those words before.

Gazing down at the ocean, Rishe continued, "For instance, I want to go to places with beautiful things. A field full of sunflowers, or a forest with a carpet of autumn leaves. A beach where shards of ice wash up on the shore and sparkle in the morning sun like gemstones." Rishe's eyes crinkled as she remembered things she'd seen in her travels. "There's a certain someone I want to show those things to."

How would Arnold react to sights like that? Would he take interest in them, or would he feel nothing at all? Once she found that out, she'd set out on another journey to see something beautiful with him. She hoped to be able to take a trip like that one day.

"I think you and I wish for different things, Lady Harriet."

"I-I... I..."

"I'd love it if you told me. Not about being someone else but

about what *you'd* like to be. About your dreams.”

Harriet murmured dreamily, “What I’d like to be...” After that, she pressed her lips into a hard line. She looked down and fidgeted with her hands before gathering all her courage to shout, “I-I...! This, um, I... I’m going back to my maids!”

She ran off, and Rishe didn’t follow her. The lady knights were halfway up the cape. Aside from one particular individual, there was no one suspicious around them, so the princess shouldn’t be in any danger. Rishe watched her go, worried that she’d trip.

Then a voice sounded from up a nearby tree.

“Your face gets prettier and prettier the more I look at it.”

Rishe sighed, and an amused laugh spilled from the branches.

“That fluffy coral-pink hair and your big emerald eyes... You’re just adorable. No wonder your fiancé was so insistent that I keep my hands off you.”

“It makes me uncomfortable when you compliment me insincerely, so please stop.”

In her past life, Raul had been a friend—and somewhat of a bad influence. Even though he didn’t know that, this flirtation really rubbed her the wrong way.

“I thought you’d show yourself somewhere with fewer people,” Rishe said, looking directly up into the tree.

The man there was not dressed as Prince Curtis. He wore a black cloak and crouched atop a branch, chin in his hands. His hair was a burnt brown, but it must have been some time since he dyed it; his natural orange color peeked from the roots. Narrowing his red, almond-shaped eyes, he appraised Rishe. He was, without a doubt, the hunter Raul whom Rishe knew.

“Yet you’re not surprised at all. Pity, I was looking forward to hearing you scream.”

“How barbaric,” Rishe said with disgust.

Raul’s grin was a happy one. “You were the one who set up that noisy little trap in the castle, right?” he asked, tilting his head like a curious cat. “I thought you might be someone in my business, just dressed as a noble lady, but it doesn’t seem that way. The prince

cautioned me a little too genuinely for you to be a fake... That's my least favorite kind of trap, you know?"

Erasing one's presence was the most important task for a hunter on the prowl. Naturally, they had to avoid making any loud noises. Raul was on the mark when he pegged her as someone in the same business as him.

"It was one of your men sneaking into the castle yesterday, wasn't it?" she asked him.

Raul shrugged. "No idea. Somebody snuck in?"

"My maids witnessed a suspicious figure. He came in through the window and didn't make a sound."

"Then maybe it *was* us, and maybe it has nothing to do with us. I wonder which it is."

Rishe scowled at his teasing response, and Raul laughed.

"You're so cute!"

He slid from the branch and landed close to Rishe without so much as a sound. Harriet and her maids, who were descending the cape, wouldn't be able to see him from their position.

Raul studied Rishe with his ruby-red eyes. "In fact, I want to make you *my* wife instead of the crown prince's."

"Enough joking around. Get to the point of this little 'visit' already."

"There's no point. I just wanted to see you." The man spat out a blatantly ingenuine pickup line. "My name is Raul. In my country's mother tongue, it means 'the wolf who shows you the way.'"

I know you're lying about that name and the country you're from, though.

Nevertheless, it was a nostalgic introduction, and she found herself remembering the first time she'd heard it.

Rishe met the group who called themselves hunters in a forest in Siguel in her fifth life. She'd run across a wounded Raul and used her apothecary skills to treat his injuries.

"You saved my life. If you've got nowhere to go, please spend

some time here.”

Some dozen hunters lived together in that hut, and they were all pleasant folk. In their company, Rishe learned how to use a bow while she treated Raul. Once she learned enough, Raul took her into the forest.

“Mm. You’ve got the knack for this. I can teach you how to hunt if you want to try your hand at it for a while.”

That was how Rishe’s fifth loop began. It was fun living in the forest, and she liked learning about the animals they shared it with. She learned to predict the weather from the way bugs and birds flew, how to anticipate a prey’s next moves from their tracks, and how to catch them with traps.

Sometimes, she’d aim her bow at her prey and wait in the forest for hours without budging. Other times, she’d hunker down in the cold snow of winter until she couldn’t feel her fingers anymore. In those cases, she had to grit her teeth to keep them from chattering because then her prey would perceive her.

As she polished her skills as an archer and made her living, she realized that Raul and his men were no ordinary hunters. They told her the truth when they went to one particular location on orders from the Siguel royal family.

“So basically, we’re intelligence operatives disguised as hunters,” Raul told her from his perch on a tree branch. “It’s the perfect cover for our activities. While we ‘scout out our hunting grounds,’ we can travel all over the country and investigate nobles’ territories, you see.”

Rishe had put that all together on her own. “You can probe incidents of misgovernment and find evidence of tax fraud without worrying about people catching on.”

“That’s right. And every so often, we can ‘accidentally’ enter other countries when we get lost in the forest.” He looked down at their hunting grounds as he spoke. “My old man, the previous chief, said that in his country in the east, people like us were called falconers.”

“I wonder if that’s different from ‘ninjas.’”

“They’re similar. Ninjas are usually disguised as farmers or merchants. We usually act like real hunters and live in peace in the forest, as you know.” Raul rattled off the facts like a song.

Rishe turned to face him. Their chosen perches were narrow branches, yet she navigated them with ease thanks to Raul's training. She would never lose her balance in such a precarious place. "But when you're needed, you go on missions like this."

"Well, it is still technically hunting prey." Raul smiled, narrowing his red eyes as he looked down at a man below them. "Wait just a second, Rishe. I was told not to kill this one, so we'll track him carefully."

There was no anxiety in his skill. Raul was able to nock an arrow and aim at his target without so much as shifting the branch he was crouched on.

I learned how to hide myself and observe other people from Raul. I'm a capable hunter because of that life, but Raul is something else.

Rishe thought about "Curtis" from this morning as she stared at Raul in front of her.

He was the only one who could disguise himself as someone else down to his voice.

How did Raul interpret her gaze?

"Why are you disguising yourself as Prince Curtis?"

"Hmm..." Raul peered at Rishe's face, feigning contemplation. He acted friendly with people, but the truth was that no one interested him. Rishe was astounded by the way he scrutinized her.

He was almost like everyone's big brother among the hunters. I can't believe he's this frivolous with a complete stranger.

This was why he made so many women cry. Raul had a pretty face, and he acted kind and friendly on the surface, which only made things worse.

"Your expression doesn't change at all, not even when I get this close. Yet you turned red in a flash when the crown prince touched you!"

"Ahem! Well, I understand that you have no intent to answer my questions, at least."

"If I answer them, do I get something in return?"

"Nope. You don't," Rishe answered, feeling like she was in her

fifth loop.

Raul chuckled. “Maybe I creep you out, but hey—you didn’t say anything when you realized Prince Curtis was actually me. Forgive me saying so, but you creep *me* out just as much! No need to worry, though. I’ll behave this afternoon. Seems like it’s going to rain, anyway.”

He looked down at Harriet, encircled by her maids at the bottom of the hill. “Can I ask you to make friends with Harriet?”

Rishe peeled her eyes away from the princess to look back at Raul, but he was already gone, leaving behind nothing but the swaying trees at the top of the cape. Under the strong light of the summer sun, cicadas buzzed all around her, yet she didn’t sense any animal presence.

It does look like it’ll rain. I should tell the maids to bring the laundry inside.

With a sigh, she untied the reins from the branch and brought her horse back to the castle.

The rain came down about an hour later. It looked to be a passing shower, and it would be over quickly if they just waited a bit. Still, the downpour was heavy, kicking up a white mist as it splashed on the ground. While it fell, the maids had to bustle through their many tasks.

Summer showers had a harsh vitality to them. As Rishe listened to the pleasant plink of droplets hitting the windows, she received word that Arnold had returned from the town.

“Welcome ba—oh!” Her eyes flew wide when she met Arnold in the entry hall. He stood there sulky and soaking wet. “Are you okay?!”

Rishe sprinted toward Arnold, hastily instructing a maid to bring some towels as she passed. Liquid beads dripped from his black hair, evincing the force of the rain.

Oliver appeared behind him, equally drenched and clearly exasperated at his lord. “Goodness, there was no need to rush, was there? I suggested we wait out the rain, but you just had to insist on soldiering through it, didn’t you?”

“Hold your tongue! You didn’t need to come with me.”

“Oh, but I did! Of course, I understand your desire to return to the castle so quickly.”

“I told you to shut up!” Arnold growled, running a hand through his sopping bangs. The casual movement exposed his typically hidden forehead.

Rishe’s breath caught as she gazed at Arnold. He was a portrait of contrasts: matured by the slicked-back bangs but almost fragile due to dripping everywhere. She had no idea how to look at him.

Arnold was puzzled over Rishe’s scrutiny. “What is it?”

She felt compelled to respond. “It’s just...even your forehead is as beautiful as a work of art, Your Highness...”

“What?”

“Oh, look, the towels are here!” Rishe thanked the arriving maids and picked up one of the towels. After spreading it out, she stood on her tiptoes and draped it over his head, commencing with drying his hair.

Everyone present—Oliver included—watched her with mouths agape. Even the guards, who’d been reaching for towels of their own, were frozen in shock. Rishe wondered what everyone was gaping at as she dried Arnold’s hair with vigor.

A moment later, Arnold’s flat, muffled voice came from beneath the towel. “Rishe.”

“Yes?”

“I can dry myself.”

Rishe blinked once, then twice, and then understood at last.

“Gah!” She dropped the towel like a hot potato, her arms shooting into the air like white flags. With her arms raised in total surrender, she took two shaky steps back. Although the guards and maids didn’t dare move a muscle, Oliver alone appeared to be holding back laughter.

“I-I’m so sorry! That was completely out of line!”



“It’s fine.”

Oliver swooped in just then. “Hee hee hee, thank you, Lady Rishe. I apologize for the imposition, but could you take care of His Highness?”

Arnold glared at Oliver, but the latter remained unperturbed.

“I’m just as soaked, as you can see. Do you think you could take care of him for me?”

“Er, y-yes! Certainly! Prince Arnold, please come this way!”

At this point, Rishe just wanted the floor to swallow her whole. Propelled by that feeling, she grabbed Arnold’s arm and led him upstairs. After stuffing him into a fourth-floor room, she wiped the puddles the prince had left in the hallway in a frenzy.

Just be normal, Rishe! For goodness’ sake!

To regain some semblance of dignity, she checked on the bell traps. When she judged herself to be sufficiently calm, her maid handed her the tea she’d asked for and she knocked on the door of the room she’d all but tossed Arnold in.

“Um, Your Highness? Have you finished changing?”

“Yeah.”

Opening the door frazzled her nerves once again. When she did, she found Arnold sitting on the couch, having changed out of his wet clothes into a white shirt. His hair was still wet, but it wasn’t dripping anymore.

“H-here, have some tea. You should get something warm into you since you’re probably cold from being outside.”

“Mm,” Arnold grunted as he read over a document. He patted the space next to him with one hand, signaling for her to sit. The gesture mirrored his summons the night before. She hadn’t thought anything of it then, but now she wondered if they should have sat across from each another. Still, she didn’t have to go out of her way to refuse his offer and sit on another couch.

Rishe meekly took her place beside Arnold and looked up at him. “Are you done with your inspection of the currency exchanges?”

“For today, at least. I’ll check a few more places tomorrow and that’ll be all of them. Any issues on your end?”

“There’s something eating at Lady Harriet that worries me.”

Arnold didn’t care a whit about that, though. *He could at least feign interest*, she thought, but he showed no indication of doing so. *Prince Arnold didn’t even move when Lady Harriet fell flat on her face yesterday.*

He didn’t care about her at all, even when he saw her crying. Rishe thought about it as she watched Arnold flip through his document.

“Does your scar hurt?”

Arnold glanced at Rishe in surprise for a moment but turned away again with a huff. “Sometimes,” he said after a pause. “When it rains.”

Rishe frowned. He conducted himself the same as ever, but on a closer inspection, she could tell that Arnold was favoring his left side. She didn’t think she would be able to tell if she didn’t know about the scar on his neck.

“How could you tell?”

“I can sort of sense whenever you’re in pain now, even if it’s only a little bit.”

It wasn’t as if Rishe was monitoring Arnold’s health every second or anything, but she had heard from patients in her life as an apothecary about old wounds aching when it rained. A definitive treatment for such symptoms didn’t exist, though.

“Shall I prepare some hot water? If you warm the area up with a towel, it might alleviate the pain somewhat.”

“You don’t need to worry about it.”

“But—”

“It’s a little better now,” Arnold said softly. “So I don’t need anything else.”

She hadn’t done anything, so she didn’t know what he meant by “anything else.” But if she made too big a deal of it, the fact of the scar might become known to his enemies. The old wound was the only weak point in Arnold’s godlike swordsmanship.

Come to think of it, Raul noticed it in my life as a hunter, didn’t he?

Five years from now, Siguel entered the war against Galkhein.

After Harriet emptied Fabrannia's coffers and was executed, Siguel had to fight as part of their reparations to Fabrannia. Rishe's hunting troop was sent to battle as part of the royal family's forces. The hunters weren't on the front lines; their duty was to hide out in the forest ahead of the main force, gather intelligence, and diminish the enemy's forces as much as possible.

On one such mission, Raul whispered to her while peering from behind a rock with a monocular, "Arnold Hein may be injured."

The hunters, Rishe included, were surprised—they had only come upon the man recently, with no chances to observe him before then. They were also very cautious about the positioning of the sun for fear that Arnold would notice the light reflected off of the monocular.

"Injured, Raul? Really?"

"Yeah. On his left side, I think. Upper body? There's a chance someone landed a hit on him."

Now that she thought back on that moment, the wound Raul had sensed must have been the scar on Arnold's neck. Rishe hadn't known about it at the time, and she hadn't figured it out in her life as a knight either. She only understood her two life experiences in this one.

Raul had been sure of himself at the time, though. "If we aim for his left side, we might be able to take down *the* Arnold Hein. I want everyone to nock a poison arrow. He deflected all our shots in battle, but I'm sure even he has his guard down right now."

All of Rishe's companions aimed their bows on Raul's command. They'd shot poison arrows at Arnold Hein several days ago as well, but his sword had knocked every attack aside. Raul issued the order to try again now to take advantage of Arnold's injury.

We're downwind. There's no way Arnold Hein can hear our voices right now...so why do I have such a bad feeling about this?

Rishe felt a premonition stirring in her heart and looked through the monocular once more. Then she gasped.

Arnold Hein's blue eyes were staring right at her. She shuddered, immediately realizing that she wasn't just imagining it. Arnold Hein had been *looking at her*.

“Everyone, stop! Arnold Hein’s noticed us! We won’t hit him if we shoot!”

A buzz went through the group at Rishe’s words. Depending on what Arnold Hein did, they could soon be surrounded by enemy knights. Rishe held her breath and looked through the lens at the man. He smiled, the expression not reaching his dark eyes, and pressed his thumb to the left of his chest as if to say, *“My heart is right here.”*

He was goading Rishe into attacking him.

Because Arnold Hein hadn’t pursued them aggressively for whatever reason, they survived that day. As she sat beside Arnold now, Rishe studied him, wondering, *If I had shot him in the heart back then, I wonder where I would be now.*

Rishe might not have died in her fifth life. She could be celebrating her twenty-first birthday instead. She couldn’t imagine it.

There’s no point in thinking about futures that never came. I should be investigating whether the figure Elsie and the other maids saw yesterday was one of the hunters instead.

Her face taut and grim, Rishe organized what she knew of the incident.

They came in through the window, made no sound, and left without a trace. It’s not something a “normal person” could do, but they’re not what you’d call normal.

Considering her interactions with Raul in the alleyway yesterday and upon the cape just a few hours ago, it seemed most likely that the infiltrators were his hunters.

But if it’s the hunters sneaking in, my traps are meaningless. They would be able to notice them like Raul did.

Rishe still couldn’t dismiss the possibility it was a ghost, however, because the maids had seen it.

Those hunters wouldn’t let someone hear a rusty, creaking hinge.
Hmm...

The more she thought about it—which she couldn’t stop doing—the more she gave weight to the possibility of a ghost.

Arnold touched her hand then.

“What is it, Your Highness?”

The prince didn’t say anything. He simply traced the edge of her sapphire ring.

He touched my ring like this yesterday too.

She didn’t think he was doing it to make her feel awkward, but she couldn’t think of a reason for this intimate interaction. While she didn’t hate it or anything, it fired up her nerves all over again.

Restless, Rishe remembered what Arnold had said to her the day before: “*So the metalwork was wrought by an artisan from Coyolles, eh? You take care of it well for how detailed the craftsmanship is.*”

By any chance, is Prince Arnold—

“Rishe, the rain’s stopped.”

“Oh! You’re right!”

The sky through the window was a clear, cloudless blue, as though the downpour from mere minutes ago had been an illusion. The air was clearer than it had been that morning, and the white sunlight was incredibly bright.

“Will you do some work this afternoon? Or spend some time with Prince Curtis and Princess Harriet?”

“No. If I can, I’d like to take *you* somewhere.” Arnold stood and extended a hand to Rishe. “Do you have the time?”

She was surprised by the proposal, but Rishe nodded and took Arnold’s hand.

“Wow!” Rishe cried. She wore a light summer dress with a hat to shade her from the sun, and she had a basket of drinks in one hand.

“Hey, don’t run in the sand. You’ll fall.”

“I’m sorry, but...” Rishe couldn’t quell her excitement despite Arnold’s warning. “It’s the *beach!*”

Her eyes positively sparkled at the great expanse of water before them. She marveled at the white sand, completely free of footprints, and the water that shifted from light blue in the shallows to pale

emerald and then deep azure. This small inlet was only accessible through the castle; no one but the imperial family and their guests could visit it.

After running out onto the sand, Rishe swiveled to face Arnold. He wasn't wearing his jacket, clad instead in a white shirt and black slacks. Rishe wondered if he was hot in his outfit, but he seemed unaffected, being used to such attire.

"Prince Arnold! Forgive my immodesty, but do you mind if I remove my shoes?"

"Do what you want. Just don't hurt yourself."

Rishe set her basket down next to a rock and laid her hat over top. Then she kicked off her shoes and felt the silky sand beneath her feet. She wore sunblock she'd made herself, so she wasn't too worried about getting burned. Thanks to the earlier rain, the sand was pleasantly warm rather than scalding in the sunlight. The sea breeze wasn't humid in the least, instead carrying a note of brine on its cool, refreshing gusts.

The wind is a bit chilly, so it's both hot and cool out here! What a strange feeling!

Rishe's calf-length dress was made up of layers of chiffon. Its soft skirt danced in the wind.

"Summer's in full swing now, huh?" Rishe had come to Galkhein in spring, in the middle of the fifth month. Enjoying the lush season around her as Arnold approached, she said, "If I'd known the water would be this clean, I would have brought my bathing suit."

"..."

"I have a cute one! It's a two-piece. The top is a pretty blue while the bottom is like a frilly white skirt." As she cursed her poor choices, Arnold frowned. "What's the matter?"

After a long pause, Arnold said, "It's still a little early for swimming, isn't it?"

"I suppose so. There are a lot of rip currents around here in this season too."

She ambled toward the shore, where the gentle waves lapped at her toes. The water rose around her ankles, then immediately pulled back, the sand tickling the bottom of her feet as it shifted under her.

Rishe held up the edges of her dress and waded in a little deeper. “Hee hee, the water’s surface is so bright!”

Still standing on the beach, Arnold asked, “Is it that much fun?”

“Of course it is!” In response to Arnold’s bewilderment, Rishe pointed to the sea and told him, “Look over there. See how the surrounding water is calm, but there are whitecaps in just that one spot? That means there’s something large and heavy below the water. And you can tell how large it is from the size of the waves.”

A sailor had taught her that when she was traveling in her life as a merchant.

“The seafloor might just be raised up in that spot, or something big could have sunk there. Isn’t it fun just imagining what might be at the bottom of the deep sea?” Rishe whirled toward Arnold, splashing at the surface of the water. “Maybe there’s sunken treasure there that some pirates dropped!”

“That would be a pain in the neck. We’d have to figure out who the treasure belongs to and gather up all the potential claimants.”

“Ugh, you and your realism!”

Even so, Arnold went along with Rishe’s odd little fantasy. That made her happy.

“When I was a girl studying in my room, I desperately ate up any fragment of knowledge about the rest of the world from my textbooks.” Rishe’s eyes were hooded as she recalled the memories. “I would read the word ‘ocean’ and wonder what it was like. When I had to embroider flowers, I wondered what the real ones smelled like. Imagining those things kept me going. That’s why I was so happy every time I finally experienced something I previously could only imagine.”

She had been to the ocean many times in all of her previous lives, but the sight of it was still fresh. She’d always found it beautiful, so much more stunning than what she’d envisioned while stuck in her room all by herself. Really, she couldn’t get enough of it.

“Did you bring me to the beach because I said I wanted to go to the ocean?”

“That’s part of it.”

Rishe surmised that there was another reason, but Arnold didn’t seem forthcoming at the moment, so she didn’t bother with further

questions. She was just happy that he'd remembered what she'd said before they departed the castle.

Yet Prince Arnold is only watching. How does the ocean look in his eyes?

Arnold wore his usual neutral expression; he didn't seem moved by the gorgeous scenery in any way. Did the sight of the ocean inspire no emotion in him?

That's not all...

The way Arnold watched Rishe as she stood in the sea, it was as if she had nothing to do with him. Like he had drawn a line between them, or he had decided that there was nothing between them at all. That made Rishe feel like she had come to the seaside all by herself. She wanted to ask him about this—and if he really didn't care, she could drop it—but he looked like he was keeping his distance even from such a question.

"Prince Arnold!" she shouted, reaching out to him.

Arnold grimaced, dubious. "What's with the hand?"

"Come here, Your Highness."

His frown deepened, but Rishe guessed it wasn't because the invitation displeased him. If anything, the source of the displeasure came from the invitation being so unexpected. Making up her mind, Rishe declared, "I'm making a request, so you must listen to it."

When they got engaged, Arnold had said that he would grant any of her requests. Knowing she was referencing this, Arnold sighed. "All right."

Giving in, he bent over to remove his shoes. He neatly rolled up his pant legs and, still scowling, entered the sea. He sloshed through the water to get to Rishe, all the while looking down at his feet with a complicated expression on his face—as if walking directly on sand felt strange to him.

"What do you think?"

"No comment."

"Well then, Your Highness..." Standing next to Arnold, Rishe dropped the edges of her skirt. She decided not to worry about it getting wet. Instead, she grasped Arnold by each wrist. "You can scold me all

you want later, all right?”

“Hey, wait, you’re not going to—” The question he shot in her direction melted into realization.

“Hmph!” Rishe hurled them both backward into the water.

“Argh! Damn you!”

Surely Arnold would have been able to maintain his balance had he just been concerned for himself. Yet he tried to support Rishe as well, so they both ended up tumbling into the ocean.

Splash!

There was a great spray of water. Rishe squeezed her eyes shut and held her breath as she endured the impact before Arnold pulled her back up.

“Aah!”

Rishe sat in the ocean, which reached up to her navel in this shallow area. Her dress floated all around her as though she were a jellyfish. Arnold was drenched for the second time that day. There’d been no point in him drying his hair and changing clothes after getting caught out in the rain earlier.

“...Rishe.”

“If it’s still too early to swim, why not amuse ourselves this way?” She grinned at the novelty of trapping Arnold.

With his arms ringed around Rishe’s waist, Arnold squinted at her. “You look awfully pleased with yourself.”

“I am. I’m quite satisfied at having pranked you, Your Highness.”

“I see.” Arnold sighed and reached for Rishe’s cheek. “Very well... I’ll take you up on the offer.”

Rishe couldn’t believe her ears. “Huh?!” Yes, she’d started this little prank war, but she didn’t think he’d take it seriously.

Ignoring Rishe’s flustered reaction, Arnold went in for the kill.

“Ah, hey, Your Highness! Wait a second, that’s not fair... Eeeep!”

Splash!

The splash marked the beginning of a fierce melee. Arnold was merciless. Rishe did her best to fight back, but he was unbeatable. She was certain that if anyone else saw this scene, they would be rendered

speechless.

After a steady exchange of attacks and counterattacks in the shallows, they realized much time had passed.

“Whew! We really went all out messing around, huh?”

“I suppose we did.”

The two of them sat on the beach for a breather, clothes drenched. Rishe’s stamina was completely expended, but Arnold appeared ready for a few more rounds. There was a different sort of fatigue in his features, though—perhaps from doing something new.

Rishe reached for the basket she’d left beside a rock and took out one of the bottles. “Have some tea, Your Highness. It’s gotten pretty warm, though.”

The bottle had been chilled in the castle’s ice house, but it was close to room temperature now. Nevertheless, Arnold drank.

“Have your feelings on the ocean changed at all?”

“...I don’t know.”

She laughed, and his head swiveled in her direction. “It’s just, you really thought about it, didn’t you? I mean, you didn’t say *no*, just that you don’t know.”

Arnold’s gaze softened. He tucked Rishe’s hair behind her ear, plucked Rishe’s hat from its spot beside the basket, and covered her head.

Since he was still being gentle with her, Rishe said, “I will accept your scolding now, Your Highness.”

While she was prepared to be chastised for tripping her fiancé into the ocean, Arnold said, “I won’t punish you.”

“Huh?”

“I retaliated plenty. We’re even.”

Rishe blinked, stumped. “You go too easy on me.”

“Get used to it.” He made something not at all natural *seem* natural, but Rishe wasn’t having it.

“You need to scold me or I’ll just get worse. If you’re too nice to me, well...” She frowned and covered her mouth, murmuring, “I’ll get greedy.”

Arnold chuckled. The soft expression he wore made him look his age for once. Gazing at Rishe, he said, "I'd like that."

He sounded so gentle when he said it that Rishe's ears felt inexplicably hot.

"Everything that you do is so strange, I can never predict what's coming next."

"Augh! You're teasing me again!" Rishe wrinkled her nose in frustration, and Arnold lowered his gaze to the sand.

"Besides, there isn't all that much I can do for you. It should be fine to spoil you a little."

Rishe tilted her head to the side. "Hm? You've already granted so many of my requests."

"That's because the things you ask for are so trivial."

She found that strange. *I feel like I've been making some extreme requests by my standards.*

Arnold had readied a whole detached palace for his "hostage" fiancée and even allowed her to use a corner of the garden as a field. Rishe had hired all her own maids, and she was allowed to freely trade with merchants. All of this was selfish enough, was it not?

The question must have been written on her face. Arnold said, "There's something I must prioritize above all else." He looked out at the ocean. "If your requests go against that, then I can't grant them."

Rishe had only accepted Arnold's proposal after asking if he would grant her anything she desired. At the time, Arnold had agreed to it so long as it was within his power. In other words, he had implied from the beginning that there were some requests he could not grant.

"Due to my position, there will probably be times when my duty to work and country interferes as well...but that's not all." Arnold fixed his blue eyes on Rishe. "Even if you tire of this engagement, I won't let you leave my side."

A dull pain wreathed her heart. "Because of the reason you proposed to me?"

He studied her. "That's right."

Rishe's hand crept to her chest, just over her heart. She hoped he wouldn't notice. It was wrong of her to feel despondent about this.

It's not like I've told him my top priority either. Rishe looked down, grateful for the cover her hat afforded her face. She clung to it, tracing lines in the soft sand with her finger.

I haven't told him "I don't want you to kill your father" or "I don't want you to start that war." I'm hiding my greatest desires from him, so I can't fault him for hiding things from me.

She couldn't just come out and tell him those things, though.

I can't say it. I mean, the only reason Prince Arnold is allowing me such freedom is because he doesn't know that my objective is to stop the war.

Everything Rishe did in this life, she did to interfere with Arnold's plans. Her motivation for every move was to avoid the war.

I'm sure that Prince Arnold's strong will is the catalyst for the conflict. If he didn't feel so strongly about it, there's no way such a kind person would start such a bloody war.

The "something" Arnold had to prioritize was the war in the future. And if he found out about Rishe's interference, she would become his enemy in this life too.

It won't be easy thwarting Prince Arnold's plans. If I have one advantage over him, it's that I know the future.

To hold that advantage, she had to keep her loop-given foresight to herself.

Yes, I have secrets too. I have no right to know what Prince Arnold might be hiding from me.

And yet, her heart ached. Rishe had asked Arnold about the reason he chose her as his fiancée several times now, but she could no longer voice the question. Instead, she regarded Arnold from under her hat.

"What do you want me to do once I'm your wife, Prince Arnold?"

The question startled him. He smiled at Rishe like he found her the most captivating thing in all the world. "You've changed the question, I see."

"I know you won't answer the normal one." It was the truth, but it felt like a lie.

Arnold's answer came easily. "What I want you to do? That's simple. It's 'idle around the castle' and 'be utterly useless,' isn't it?" He

was referring to what Rishe said after he proposed to her.

“Th-that’s not what you want, it’s what I want!”

“Still, it hardly seems possible for you.”

“Huh? What do you mean it’s not possible?! I absolutely plan to win my life of indolence after this, you hear me?!”

“Why must you *win* it? You’re not suited to indolence anyway.”

What does he mean by that? Rishe thought, indignant.

Then Arnold added, “Why do you ask in the first place?”

“Lady Harriet appears to be pushing herself too hard to prepare for her own marriage. I was curious what a man might be thinking at a time like this.” This wasn’t a lie, per se. She seized upon the opportunity to ask Arnold about this as well. “What sort of country does Fabrannia seem like to you, Your Highness?” She asked the question as if she hadn’t been there herself in a past life.

“In my view, it’s the country on the western continent that’s most proactive in its diplomatic relations with Galkhein.”

“That displeases you?”

“There aren’t many advantages for us right now. They might be advantageous allies in the future, but we have many other things to prioritize right now.”

“So they’re annoying.”

Rishe recalled Harriet’s head maid saying that the Fabrannian king wished that this visit would foster good relations between their countries.

“The western continent is full of small countries, though. If Galkhein must get along with just one of them, Fabrannia is the most likely, as it leads the alliance in that region.”

To Arnold, other western countries like Siguel were worth less than Fabrannia.

“Though small, Galkhein can’t ignore Fabrannia due to its position in the west.”

“More or less.”

There was one thing Rishe still didn’t understand. *I don’t know why Prince Arnold proposed to me when I’m just a duke’s daughter from a minor*

country. In the same way...

She remembered the future in her fifth loop.

I don't see how Fabrannia benefits in a political marriage with Siguel. It's only natural for Lady Harriet to accept her obligation in a political marriage. I thought I had to serve the same purpose until Prince Dietrich broke off our engagement.

It didn't sit right with her. She frowned. Only when she'd chosen to live her life as a merchant did she start to enjoy her own life and experiences. That was why she hadn't even wanted to think about marrying anyone in all her lives up until now.

But it's different in this life.

Rishe looked up, and her eyes met Arnold's as he gazed down at her. This man was going to be her husband. The moment she thought that, his words played back in her head: *"You don't need to be resolute to become my wife."*

She sighed, willing it to conceal her heartache.

"May I make another request so soon after the last?"

"Go ahead. What is it?"

"There's a record I'd like to check with the currency exchanges."

Arnold shot an odd look her way, so Rishe pulled the basket over and took out the document tube inside.

"It's not quite a trade, but I also have a report for you, Your Highness."

The prince squinted at it from beside her. "Market prices for gold and silver in various countries?"

She nodded. "I asked Mr. Tully of the Aria Trading Company to investigate this out of personal interest."

Rishe had received the report from Tully that morning. She'd given it a thorough read-through, mentally stowing away the information she needed. Now she handed the document to Arnold. "They're all from different points in time, but the oldest one is from six months ago. Will this help your plan at all, Your Highness?"

"Hah!" Arnold flashed a bemused smile. "How did you know I was considering reminting our currency?"

I knew he'd figure out my intentions, but after a single glance at the list?

Surprised, Rishe answered, "I felt like you weren't visiting this town merely to inspect the currency exchanges. I also noticed you touching my hand and running your fingers over my ring a few times." She caressed the ring herself, feeling a little bashful. "You mentioned Coyolles when you touched it yesterday, didn't you?"

"You worked out my plans just from that?"

"Well, it did take a bit of time."

Rishe and Arnold were both aware of the problems besieging Coyolles. It lacked military strength, leading its neighboring countries to throw their weight around. This problem was sure to worsen as the yield of gems and precious metals from its mines decreased. However, its prospects were somewhat brighter now that Arnold and Kyle had entered their agreement. Their remaining problem was that the fundamental reason for Coyolles's less than advantageous position hadn't been solved. In other words, no matter what happened, Coyolles's production of gems and precious metals would trickle to nothing.

"Obviously, the gold and silver coins used in various countries are made with real gold and silver," Rishe said.

The value of these coins was determined by the amount of precious metals within. Much of the gold and silver in the world had come from Coyolles.

"At this rate, there will be less and less gold and silver circulating in other countries, won't there?"

"That's right. That means there will be a shortage of the metals necessary to create gold and silver coins."

What would happen then? Rishe had witnessed that very thing in the future herself. That was why she'd asked Tully to gather this information, so that she could do something about it.

"Currency must be minted periodically in order to keep the economy running," Arnold said. "If a country can't get the material to mint that currency, their economy collapses."

"As far as I'm aware, Galkhein has gold and silver mines of its own, does it not?"

Since coming to this country, Rishe had been looking into Galkhein's internal affairs with whatever free time she could spare. According to what she'd found, many of the nation's mines were in countries that had been conquered by Galkhein during the emperor's war.

"Galkhein should have ample resources of gold and silver in store, correct?" she asked.

"Indeed. We won't suffer many ill effects from Coyolles's - reduction in exports."

"Then may I ask why you're so concerned about the coming shortage of gold and silver, Your Highness?"

"I find your question peculiar. I thought you were aware of my reasons, which is precisely why you came up with the idea of reminting and handed me this information."

Arnold smiled teasingly; he'd hit the nail on the head. Rishe had her theories, but she needed a little more information to confirm them. Since he bade her to talk, she did.

"Even if exports from Coyolles stop, Galkhein has its own plentiful sources of gold and silver. However, demand is up in other countries, and prices are rising." Scarcity led to higher prices, while abundance led to lower ones. That was a fundamental principle of trade. "If the same amount of gold could create fifty thousand coins in Galkhein and one hundred thousand coins in other countries, then people will want Galkhein coins. Not as foreign currency but for the precious metal contained within."

"Yes. Unlike other exports, it's hard for a country to regulate foreign currency. After all, it's a normal thing to carry even between countries."

There were sure to be people who would bring Galkhein currency to other countries and sell it simply as gold. Those people would obtain foreign currency, then bring it to a currency exchange in Galkhein. Their foreign currency would then be converted into Galkhein coins, and they would end up with more money than they left the country with.

"If their currency is constantly being exported to other countries, even Galkhein will soon end up with a gold and silver shortage of their own."

Precisely because Galkhein's gold and silver output was stable, it was impossible to avoid a difference in their value between countries—though it was difficult to affect the value of gold and silver coins.

It's very dangerous for a country to have stable production of gold and silver without prices spiking through the roof.

Rishe had seen a country with gold mines wind up in that situation in a past life. At the time, Coyolles had closed their mines with the excuse that they'd had to send all their men off to war with Galkhein. The reality was that their mines had dried up. In a case like this, even if they could avoid war with other countries, the price of gold would still spike in those places.

"Even Galkhein reminds their currency every once in a while, does it not?"

"It's a necessary preventive measure against counterfeiting. And with the information we have about Coyolles now, this is probably a good time to do it."

"Do you plan to reduce the gold and silver content in Galkhein currency?"

Arnold returned his gaze to the sea. After a pause, he said, "I suppose so." It was an uncharacteristically vague response. "If we do, we can manufacture coins without using as many resources as we used to. If we export the excess material to other countries, we can avoid drastic jumps in prices."

"So aiding other countries is necessary to Galkhein, then."

"Well, in order for this country to thrive, so too must its trading partners."

Arnold's politics really did resemble the commerce theories that Rishe subscribed to. Merchants also knew it was foolish to hoard wealth all to yourself. There was no point in having resources if no one else had them, since that meant there was no way for you to gain anything.

"Were you inspecting the currency exchanges in this town to investigate the prices of gold and silver in other countries, Prince Arnold?"

"If I said I was?" Arnold smiled and flicked the back of the papers Rishe had handed him. "I'm impressed that you knew just the information I wanted. I didn't even give you any hints that I know of."

Well, I do know the future.

Even if she had to hide the real reason from him, they were both aware of the state of Coyolles's exports and what effect it would have on other countries' economies. The conclusion was easy enough to draw when she put together Arnold's movements in this town with what she knew of the future. In fact, it was surprising that *Arnold* could move with such certainty with what little information he had.

No. There's a future Prince Arnold knows about as well.

The economic chaos a few years down the line had one other, more significant cause, and that was Arnold's war. The worldwide fighting exhausted smaller countries and caused larger ones to invest heavily in war funds.

Prince Arnold might base all his actions on the war he himself will start in the future.

Rishe looked down. She'd taken all sorts of actions at this point, but she was starting to feel like she'd changed nothing thus far.

Did he really come to this town just to see about reminting currency?

A sense of urgency smoldered inside her, and when she took a deep breath to steady herself...the sea breeze snatched her hat away.

"Oh!"

Rishe leaped up after it. At that same moment, someone happened to be coming down the castle stairs.

"Hey. The rain's let up, hasn't it?"

"...Prince Curtis."

Raul smiled, his red eyes crinkling at the corners. He picked up Rishe's hat and approached her. "I expressed my desire to take a seaside stroll and was directed to this beach. I didn't know the two of you were here. I apologize for intruding."

You liar!

There was no way Raul hadn't known Rishe and Arnold were at the beach.

He chuckled, taking note of how wet her dress and hair were, and held out her hat. Even the laugh sounded just like the real Curtis's. "Here you are."

“Thank you,” she said, though she hesitated to take the hat. She recognized Raul’s scrutinizing look. Although she’d trusted Raul in her fifth loop, she didn’t know his goal this time around. She had to be careful under his watchful eye.

While all this went through her head, a hand shot out from her side.

“Ack! Prince Arnold!”

Arnold stood next to her and took the hat instead. “Let me express my thanks to you on my wife’s part. Here, Rishe.”

The hat landed on her head, and Rishe tugged it down so that it would stay on. She looked between Arnold and Raul. “Thank you both.”

Neither man was looking at Rishe, however.

Raul-pretending-to-be-Curtis kept his smile painted on, staring at Arnold. “Thank you for calling a merchant to entertain Harriet this morning. It seems she was very interested in all the products they had on offer from Galkhein.”

Arnold was as expressionless as ever. “I’m happy to hear it. If you have any other requests, make them without restraint.”

“Well then, if I may be so bold, I would relish the chance to speak with Lady Rishe.” Raul grinned at Rishe and added, “I heard from my sister that you’re an avid reader. Perhaps we could chat, say, after dinner.”

He’s definitely got something else up his sleeve!

Raul’s gaze fell on Arnold once more. She realized with a start that he was observing Arnold carefully. His words from her fifth loop came back to her: “*Arnold Hein may be injured.*” The prince was dressed lighter than usual, with just his usual shirt between the two of them. It would be much easier for Raul to study the way he moved in this sort of garb.

If Raul notices Prince Arnold’s scar...

Rishe was sure Arnold didn’t want anyone to find out about his one weakness. She made up her mind to distract Raul.

“Of course, Prince Curtis!” she said brightly, stepping forward with a big smile on her face. If she could hide the prince behind her, she would, but there was no way to conceal the much taller Arnold. She

wanted to protect him as much as she could, anyway. “May I ask what sort of books you read?”

“If it can be called a book, I’ll read it no matter the subject. I enjoy reading anything written.”

Rishe nodded with faux delight, thinking that was just the sort of thing Curtis would say. “I understand just what you mean!”

“I’m thrilled to hear you feel the same, Lady Rishe. On summer days like this, I love to lie in the shade of a tree and read. With some sweets at my side, there’d be nothing better.”

Raul actually hated sweets, but since Curtis had a sweet tooth, he was playing the part. Rishe knew what Raul was really like, so the conversation rang that much hollower.

Even if it’s just a superficial exchange, I must keep his attention off Prince Arnold!

But Rishe’s efforts were in vain as Raul once again smiled at Arnold. “You have a truly wonderful fiancée. I envy you, Prince Arnold.”

How did that conversation lead to you provoking Prince Arnold?! Rishe protested internally, the smile still pasted on her face. She had no idea how Arnold was reacting to that statement.

Before she could turn around to check, Raul continued, “I was quite surprised when I heard the news. Not only had the crown prince of Galkhein announced his engagement to a foreign lady, but their wedding ceremony would be in a mere three months.” His red eyes slid up to Arnold behind her. “It’s very sudden, don’t you think? Is that just how smitten you are with the lady?”

Rishe felt like the air around her had frozen solid. Arnold was no doubt subjecting Raul to a markedly neutral stare. She couldn’t bear to listen any longer, so she tried to change the subject. “Um, Prince Curtis? I apologize for the abrupt shift in the conversation, but might Lady Harriet—”

“Yes, that’s right.” The interruption came not from Raul but from Arnold behind her. He pulled Rishe toward him, removed her hat, and brought his lips right to Rishe’s ear. Still looking at Raul, he said, “I’ve been hopelessly in love with Rishe since I first laid eyes on her.”

At that, Rishe’s heart throbbed painfully. Arnold must have

noticed that she'd gone rigid in his grasp, but he paid no mind, continuing in a low growl that etched itself into Rishe's eardrum. "I desired from the bottom of my heart to have her as my own, proposed to her with whatever I could offer in exchange, and obtained her hand. The reason our marriage is so rushed is because I want to make her my wife as soon as possible."

"Y-Your Highness, please!" Rishe tried to slip out of his hand, but he held her with the other instead. His fingers snaked down and wrapped around hers.

"I'm concerned she'll be snatched up like the wind by another man if I don't do this."

A third party might've mistaken his overprotective lines for impassioned whispers, but Rishe knew them to be lies. Of course, it wasn't that Arnold couldn't hide his emotions; he was going out of his way *not* to hide them. She knew his words were intended for the man in front of them and no one else.

It's all right. Rishe swallowed hard. *I know what your intentions are, Your Highness.*

Rishe herself had been curious about the shortness of their engagement. He'd proposed to her in the fifth month, and their ceremony was set for the middle of the eighth month. Rishe's wedding to her original fiancé, Dietrich, was supposed to be in the ninth month of the same year. As it stood, there was already some progress on her wedding dress, but she doubted the same was true for anything on the Galkhein side of things.

Wedding preparations were one thing, but the invitations to foreign guests had been even bolder. Since Galkhein was such a powerful country, foreign royalty and nobility were under pressure to attend the ceremony. The practical Arnold would never do something like this for no reason—and especially not for love. Rishe understood that well.

"I'm sure you'll be a very happy bride, Lady Rishe," Raul said with a smile only Rishe could tell was strained. It was the first crack she'd ever seen in his veneer, including her life as a hunter. Arnold must have given him quite the glare.

Raul quickly recovered, however, and his expression softened. "Harriet has been set to marry into Fabrannia's royal family since she

was young. I worry about her, though it's selfish of me to do so when I'm the one forcing her into the position." He shrugged. "Few political marriages work out to be happy ones."

"You're right about that." There was a small but unmistakable sneer in Arnold's voice. "Pressuring a weaker country into a political marriage is nothing less than detestable."

Before Rishe could wheel to face Arnold, he plopped the hat back on her head. "Would you like to talk to Prince Curtis about books, Rishe?"

"Yes," she said with a nod. A lie, but she wanted to keep Raul's attention off of him.

His gaze was tender. "Then go right ahead." No matter how gently he spoke to her or looked upon her, he'd once again drawn a line between them. "I'm going to get back to work. If you need anything, I'll be in my office."

"Wait!" Rishe reached out and grabbed Arnold's hand before he could walk away.

Arnold turned around, eyes wide. Rishe clutched his hand, courageously lacing their fingers together.

It doesn't matter what Prince Arnold meant by what he said. For now, she just had to do what she must. And she would reach for what she wanted to do too—taking Arnold's hand now being one of them.

"I'd like for you to join us," she declared.

Arnold's brow furrowed. Her free hand joined the other, thus holding his hand between hers in protest of his reaction. Yet Arnold said nothing.

She worried he was going to turn her down like it was the obvious thing to do, but Arnold sighed at last and said, "If I can find the time."

Relieved and overjoyed, Rishe beamed at Arnold. "For the time being, shall we head back inside and change? We're sopping wet."

"Yeah."

Rishe turned back to Raul with a grin, still holding hands with Arnold. "Well then, Prince Curtis. We'll excuse ourselves, if you don't mind." Then she wiped the smile from her face and shot him a cautioning look. "Good day."

“Yes, Lady Rishe.” The corners of Raul’s eyes crinkled again. It was a look only Rishe knew contained hidden meaning.

Although she still wasn’t sure what his aim was, she opted to walk away with Arnold for now. Naturally, she never heard what he muttered to himself once he was left alone on the beach.

“What a handsome couple. Anyone would think that the two of them are made for each other.”

The smile on Raul’s face was the same one usually reserved for prey.

“So why do they seem so fragile?”

Chapter 3

ONCE BACK AT THE CASTLE and alone in her own room, Rishe decided to take a bath. She washed off the seawater and sunblock, cleaning herself with a soap that was yet another of her own concoctions. Since it was still bright out, she didn't fear bathing by herself.

After she finished and her hair was dry, there was a knock on the door of the room serving as her study.

Elsie entered and dipped into a curtsy. "Lady Rishe, the items you requested from Mr. Tully have arrived."

"Thank you. How do they look?"

The maid's head snapped up, and her eyes betrayed an excited glimmer. "Mr. Tully is amazing! They're just as I expected. It's impressive enough that he could deliver them by evening when you requested them just this morning, but they're also exactly what you specified."

Elsie's reaction brought a smile to Rishe's face. She stood and set off for Harriet's room. The princess should have been expecting her, but when Rishe arrived at her door, she was downright flabbergasted.

"L-L-L-L-Lady Rishe!" Harriet attempted to leap to her feet but slammed her knees into the coffee table before her.

Rishe dashed over to her. "Are you all right?!"

"Wh-why... What are you doing in my room, Lady Rishe?" Harriet asked, close to tears. "There was no need to trouble yourself by coming here! I'm very sorry! I apologize for even being alive!"

"Erm, please calm yourself, Lady Harriet. Were you not told of the reason for my visit?" She glanced up at the head maid.

With her hair tied neatly up, the older woman said, "I worried that if I told her you were coming, she would fall ill from nerves while she waited."

It certainly wasn't outside the realm of possibility. Rishe's smile was wry. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to talk to you, Lady Harriet...and I

had something I wanted to ask your head maid for as well.”

“Oh. I-I heard about that. You wanted her to teach your maids.”

The head maid nodded. “Very well. I have much more experience than your young maids. There’s still plenty for me to learn, but I will teach them all whatever I can.”

“Thank you so much! My maids are all thrilled to learn from you.”

Rishe’s maids were still getting used to their work. Slowly but surely, they were getting the hang of reading and writing too. Learning had become fun for them. When Rishe had asked them if they wanted to learn from the head maid, they were enthusiastic.

“I’ll be on my way, then.” The head maid looked at Elsie, who stood by the door. “I leave this to you.”

Elsie gave a solemn nod. With the head maid gone, it was just the three of them in Harriet’s guest room.

“Lady Harriet, is there anything you desire right now?” Rishe asked, sitting on the couch. Her presence only seemed to make Harriet more nervous. But Rishe’s patience was rewarded, as Harriet at length opened her mouth.

“N-no, not really. Galkhein is...a wonderful place, and my room is very comfortable. I-I’m sorry I don’t have anything to say in situations like these...”

“Don’t worry. I’m not trying to make conversation, I just want to know. If you could have your wish, if you could have *anything* you desired, what would you want, Lady Harriet?”

“Books. A lot of books.”

Harriet’s frank answer surprised Rishe.

“I want so many books that I can read and read and never run out...b-but if I had that many books, I could never read them all—I couldn’t just keep them to myself. I don’t just want to monopolize books, I want to share them with all of the people who love them.” Harriet’s head was bowed low, but this time, it was due to indulgence in her happy fantasy.

I am less and less convinced that this same Lady Harriet bankrupted her country by splurging on dresses and gems from foreign countries... regardless of what the future holds.

There was one more thing Rishe wanted to confirm, so she said, “You mentioned something about your own appearance earlier.”

With the Aria Trading Company’s products in front of her, Harriet had said, “*If I show him my face, His Majesty might break off our engagement.*” She must have grown her bangs out to hide it.

“Did the king of Fabrannia say something terrible to you, Lady Harriet?”

“I-It wasn’t terrible, no! He just spoke the truth.” Harriet pasted a fake, awkward smile on her face and said, “My engagement to King Walter was decided when I was young. I went to meet him once with my mother, who was still alive at the time. I was so excited, and I dressed up more than I should have... Um, it’s really so embarrassing.”

Rishe frowned, listening.

“Every time I remember it, I wish I had known my place then. I was just so stupid... There was no way someone like me could dress up like a beautiful doll. My eyes cause people great distress, so I can’t even figure out why I thought I could show them to King Walter.” She laughed dryly, a hollow cover for the pain in her heart. “It’s not the ones who are hurt that should be ashamed but the person who hurt them.”

Harriet’s shoulders trembled.

Lady Harriet’s words must be those of the king of Fabrannia. Rishe kept the thought to herself and asked instead, “You mentioned a few times that your eyes cause people distress, Lady Harriet. Why is that?”

“B-before I realize it, I scowl and glare at everyone around me... I don’t mean to do it, but it happens without thinking, and I make a scary face like I’m mad.”

Rishe felt the vague suspicions she harbored would prove correct. “Thank you for telling me. My next question is directed toward the younger Lady Harriet.”

“Ah, yes?”

“Think back to when you were a girl, when you dressed up to meet His Majesty. Were you happy as a child?”

Harriet’s breath caught. “I-I... No... When I remember it, I just get so ashamed...” She hung her head, and Rishe gently took Harriet’s hand in hers.

“Did you feel the same way as a child?”

Harriet’s small lips pressed into a tight line. She bowed her head timidly, squeezing out a tiny voice that shook with unshed tears. “I was embarrassed...but I wasn’t ashamed. My heart was pounding, and I wanted...I wanted him to look forward to the wedding at least a little bit instead of dreading it!”

“Oh, Lady Harriet...”

“I-I heard King Walter wanted to marry one of Galkhein’s princesses instead! But it didn’t work out...”

Rishe was surprised to hear that, but Harriet’s problems came first. “So it isn’t as though you always hated dressing up.”

The princess’s hand quavered in Rishe’s. “I...I do think it’s indecent...for me to hide my face with my hair... As indecent as my actual face...”

Harriet slowly, ever so slowly, made her feelings known.

“Yet it’s equally indecent...for someone like me to think I could dress in the latest fashions and change myself... It’s impudent and shameful!”

Rishe let go of Harriet’s hand and stroked her hair.

“Wh-what’s this, Lady Rishe?”

“I’m sorry for making you discuss something so painful.” She thought she glimpsed Harriet blinking from beneath her long bangs. “Once, when I was trembling with fright, someone stroked my hair and soothed my spirit.”

Arnold had done just that the day before, when she first revealed her fear of ghosts. Harriet’s blonde hair was well cared for. It felt like silk under Rishe’s hand.

Harriet was stunned, her next words absentminded. “H-how strange... I really do feel comforted.”

Rishe smiled, relieved. “I’m glad to hear it.”

Lowering her gaze, Harriet asked, “Um, why would you do this for me, Lady Rishe?”

“I’m sorry. I just can’t leave you alone.” Rishe stroked Harriet’s golden hair. “If you’ll pardon me for saying so, Lady Harriet...” Staring straight at her, Rishe said plainly, “You have dry eyes.”

“Huh?” Harriet seemed to think she misheard Rishe, but there was no way to misinterpret her words.

“I’m almost certain your eyes are dry,” Rishe went on. “You spend every free moment reading—often late into the night by lamplight, right? Perhaps even by moonlight if you don’t want your strict head maid to know that you’re still awake reading unrelated books when you should be studying for your upcoming position as queen.”

“Eep! How did you know?!”

“When people concentrate on the task before them, they blink less, and their eyes dry out faster. Add to that your long bangs. Not only do they make you strain your eyes, but your hair could be causing little bits of damage to them as well.”

Rishe’s grave reasoning sapped the color from Harriet’s face.

“As a test, do you think you could open your eyes for ten seconds without blinking, Lady Harriet?”

“I-I can’t! In fact, I can’t even imagine it!”

“Ordinarily, people can do that without a problem.”

This floored the princess.

“If your eyes are dried out and damaged over a long period of time, they’ll become more sensitive to brightness,” Rishe said. “It’ll be harder to open them since they’ll want to avoid getting drier. That will put strain on your brow, causing you to frown unconsciously.”

Harriet had been looking down the whole time they’d been in town. Rishe had wondered if that was due to her personality or if there was more at play. Since the white buildings of Vinrhys reflected the summer sun, they were much too bright for her eyes. Rishe figured Harriet kept her eyes trained to her feet as she walked because the ground reflected less light.

“I happen to have some apothecary knowledge. I’m just hoping I can help improve your health in any way, Lady Harriet.”

“I, erm...”

“If you want to be fashionable, but you feel ashamed to even think that way, then do you think you could muster your courage if it’s to improve your health?”

“Hrk!”

“Elsie?” Rishe called, and the maid waiting by the door stepped forward. In the boxes beside her were several dresses she had ordered from the Aria Trading Company.

Immediately afterward, Harriet’s reedy scream echoed from the guest room.

“Ooh, that girl...!”

“Please don’t scold Lady Harriet, Miss Head Maid.”

Rishe walked through the castle halls, a smile playing on her lips. Harriet’s head maid followed a few steps behind her, hair in a tight bun and back straight as a pole.

“I asked Lady Harriet if I could go get you myself,” Rishe told her. “I wanted to sneak a peek at my maids and see how they were doing.”

“M-my, is that so? I must say, Lady Rishe, though your maids are still inexperienced, they are all quite eager to learn. It’s wonderful.”

“I agree! I’m quite proud of my maids. Thank you very much for instructing them.”

The head maid suddenly went meek. “It’s the least I can do after you acted as Her Highness’s escort, Lady Rishe.”

Rishe had volunteered for the task, but the head maid must have felt responsible for what had happened in some way.

“Siguel’s lady knights are here now, and the Fabrannian knights are starting to recover. While we won’t have a full detail, a few of them will be able to resume their guard duties tomorrow.”

Much as Rishe wanted to recommend that they rest and recover their stamina, she couldn’t comment on another country’s security, so she held her tongue. She reluctantly switched to small talk instead.

“You’re from Siguel, right?” Rishe wanted to find out more about Siguel for her conversations with Harriet.

The maid stared at Rishe, surprised. “How did you know?”

“Did you not want people to know?”

“No, it’s not that. Most people assume I’m from Fabrannia if I

don't say otherwise," the head maid said, her eyes cold and downcast. "I imagine they base it on how I interact with Her Highness."

Rishe blinked, listening intently.

"I served the household of Her Majesty, the late queen...Princess Harriet's mother," the head maid explained. "I took care of Her Majesty until she married into the royal family, then continued serving her original ducal household."

"If I may, how did you come to meet Lady Harriet and Prince Curtis?"

"I was selected to accompany the princess to Fabrannia when it was decided that she would marry His Majesty. This is the first time I've seen His Highness in person."

Then the head maid likely didn't know that this Curtis was a fake. If Rishe hadn't been repeating her lives, Harriet was the only one who would know about Raul.

"The first time I met Her Highness, I was truly depressed."

Those were extreme words to direct toward one's mistress. Rishe said nothing and continued to observe the head maid.

"Siguel is not a powerful country. Books are plentiful, but they have assets they can leverage in negotiations with other countries." The maid scowled. "Our relationship with Fabrannia is very important to Siguel, but with how unreliable the linchpin of that relationship is—that would be Her Highness—it will be impossible to build a strong bond."

"Lady Harriet said she wanted to change, though."

"She did...? It would be difficult, I imagine. She's far too faint of heart." The maid's quiet words had all the power of a shout in the middle of the deserted hallway.

"At this rate, Siguel will just shame itself before Fabrannia. All of the other maids are in the employ of Fabrannia's royal family. None of us have managed to build a relationship of trust with Her Highness. We can only interact with her in an impersonal manner. It's only natural—I can't imagine the other maids wanting to serve Her Highness."

Right then, Rishe stopped in her tracks. They'd just so happened to arrive in front of Harriet's room. Before the door, Rishe turned back to the head maid, smiled, and said, "Miss Head Maid, thinking that she wants to change is already proof that the change is underway."

“I suppose...”

Rishe turned back to the door and knocked. There was no response from inside. Instead, they could hear several people talking.

The head maid noticed that as well, glaring at the door. “What could that be? There’s quite a racket in there.”

“Hee hee hee. We’re coming in, Lady Harriet!”

The moment Rishe pushed the door open, a chorus of cheerful voices spilled forth.

“Oh, you look so beautiful!”

The head maid’s eyebrows shot up.

“Your skin is so clear and pretty. It’s not damaged from makeup at all...”

“The dress looks wonderful as well. So summery and refreshing!”

The voices belonged to Harriet’s maids. After a few moments of silence, the head maid burst into the room. Her eyes almost popped out of their sockets as she beheld the woman by the window. “I-Is that you, Your Highness?!”

Harriet looked like a whole new woman. For starters, her long bangs were braided to the side. This huge improvement bared her forehead and her olive-green eyes, which were downcast in embarrassment. A light chartreuse dress showed off her slender, elegant figure.

“Er, this is, um...”

As Harriet blinked restlessly, the head maid gaped at her in astonishment. The princess wore her hair half up; the rest of her voluminous blonde hair had been ironed into gentle curls, giving it a light, fluffy appearance. When Harriet hung her head, her swaying locks sent a faint perfume wafting through the air. Her maids surrounded her, grinning as they gushed.

“This dress has been in style as of late. It leaves a very proper impression, so it’s perfect for the gentle Princess Harriet.”

“Hrk! Th-thank you...”

Even as she fidgeted, Harriet bowed her head to her maids, the picture of politeness. Then she looked up at Rishe, relieved. Rishe had been the one to apply the makeup, which enhanced her soft features.

She'd applied some powder, tidied up the princess's brows, and painted her lips rose red. In addition to those simple touches, she applied certain techniques to Harriet's eyelids to make the sharp-looking eyes that had long tormented her seem softer, painting shadows in some spots while directing light to others. During her work, Harriet's expression had become brighter and brighter.

"Another benefit of makeup is that you can hide or downplay the parts of your face you don't like," Rishe had explained to Harriet as she stared, entranced by her own face. There were other things she wanted Harriet to learn about makeup, but to lull her into acceptance, she focused on the "hiding" aspect.

The head maid regarded Harriet with sternness. "Your Highness, you look..."

"I-I-I-I'm sorry! Um, er, it's strange, isn't it?!" Harriet cried, and the maid's eyes flew wider still.

Rishe could see why the woman was so surprised. Harriet had undoubtedly disparaged herself with the same words in the past, but right now, she was completely and utterly different. And the head maid, who was closer to her than anyone else, saw it clear as day.

Harriet's face was still turned toward the floor and her shoulders shook, yet she made eye contact with the head maid. Her olive-colored eyes were no longer hidden behind her thick bangs.

Appraising her, the head maid said, "You look beautiful, Your Highness."

Harriet's face scrunched up, teary. She looked like she wanted to dive under her bedcovers and hide, but more than that, there was a great relief in her expression.

For Rishe's part, she was over the moon about Harriet's transformation. "It's just like I said, isn't it, Lady Harriet? I knew Miss Head Maid would praise y—"

"However!" A scolding voice rang out, causing Harriet to flinch. "What is the meaning of that posture, Your Highness?! Have I not told you time and time again not to hunch your back?!"

"Y-yes, ma'am!"

"Back straight, chest out! Otherwise, the whole ensemble is ruined!"

Harriet frantically attempted to straighten her back. Rishe giggled, finding the exchange heartwarming.

She had no idea Harriet's bashful expression would cloud over in just one hour.

"I-I'm very sorry..."

Harriet bowed her head, on the verge of tears in a corner of Vinrhys. The soft sunlight of late afternoon lent her hair a golden glow.

Rishe shook her head, smiling at Harriet's tiny apology. "It's quite all right. Don't worry about it, Lady Harriet."

"No! Your Highness, you must take this opportunity to reflect on your actions. It's because you said you wished to shop in town until dinner that Lady Rishe accompanied you, is it not? You said you would get your things together on your own, so I was touched and allowed you to do so—and now look what's happened!" The head maid sighed, a deep crease in her brow. "To think you'd hand your maid the bag with your *Fabrannian* currency and not the currency of Galkhein..."

Harriet's head was so low, it was as if a heavy stone were pressed atop it. The head maid ranted on, piling on even more weight.

"You can't buy anything in a Galkhein store with Fabrannian currency! Thankfully, this town has currency exchanges, but still!"

"That's right! There are currency exchanges in this town, so there's no problem at all!" Rishe cut in and smiled at Harriet. "Your maid is having the money exchanged right now, so once that's done, we can shop until dinnertime!"

"Urgh... Thank you."

"We greatly appreciate your magnanimity, Lady Rishe. Be sure not to take advantage of her kindness, Princess Harriet."

Rishe turned away from the tongue-lashing, smiling awkwardly. They were waiting next door to the currency exchange for another maid. Though they tried to keep out of the way, they were still attracting attention as a group of over ten people out on the street.

Five of the recovered Fabrannian knights had chosen to

accompany them on their shopping trip, and they were also joined by the Siguelian knights Raul had brought with him. Wanting to avoid drawing even *more* attention, Rishe had left her usual knight detail at the castle.

None of the Fabrannian knights are making eye contact or communicating with the Siguelian knights.

Evidently, they were going about their missions separately with no intent to collaborate to protect Harriet.

The Fabrannian knights seem more skilled than those from Siguel... So His Majesty at least made sure his fiancée was protected on her journey.

Rishe entertained that train of thought for a moment.

The king of Fabrannia gave Lady Harriet plenty of spending money and told her to shop as much as she wished in Galkhein, didn't he? Also, they can't have many lady knights, but he specifically sent skilled ones along with her.

It was the king of Fabrannia who had hurt Harriet when she was young, but his actions indicated he was taking good care of her.

As she mulled it over, Rishe sensed a pair of eyes on her. She spotted Oliver standing in front of a different currency exchange some distance away. They could see each other's faces but were too far away to talk. Oliver smiled and bowed at her, so Rishe curtsied in return.

I wonder if Oliver's out here on an errand for Prince Arnold?

As expected, Oliver entered the currency exchange. From what she'd gathered, Arnold only had a few places left to investigate, though he would have more work now that Rishe had launched her own probe. That left Oliver with more work to do too, and the guilt pricked at her a little.

She recalled the conversation she'd had with Arnold on the beach.

"Do you plan to reduce the gold and silver content in Galkhein currency?"

"I suppose so."

At the time, she'd found that answer unusually ambiguous. Why? Was there still secret knowledge Arnold was keeping close to the vest?

A voice interrupted her reverie. "Focus, Your Highness! You're slouching again!"

“Yes!” Harriet squeaked, straightening up. Rishe knew she wasn’t slouching on purpose, though.

“Why is your posture so poor? I am always telling you to stand proud!”

“Urk...”

“Miss Head Maid,” Rishe piped up on behalf of the dejected princess. “Lady Harriet’s slouching is not a matter of attitude.”

“What is it a matter of, then?”

“It’s a matter of muscle!”

Rishe was dead serious, so she wasn’t quite sure why Harriet and the head maid gawked at her.

“Muscle, you say...?”

“What it takes to stand tall is muscle! The strength to support one’s body. It’s not spirit that Lady Harriet lacks but strength!” Rishe placed a hand on her own stomach. “First, there’s your abdominal muscles, then there’s your back. From what I’ve seen of your posture, I don’t think your spine is bent yet, but it will get worse in your twenties.”

“Erm, how bad will it be?”

“If your muscles can’t support your body, your back and neck will start to curve. That puts a real strain on you, so if it goes on too long, it’ll lead to neck, shoulder, and back pain.”

If the symptoms progressed to that point, it would affect Harriet’s everyday life.

“If even sitting becomes painful, it will be harder to read as well, you know.”

“Eek! Wh-what must I do to prevent that?!”

“Well, a bare minimum of exercise would help, but good posture is a part of that. Perhaps try thinking of it not as etiquette but as something you practice a little bit each day for your health.”

Rishe pointed at the large window in the currency exchange building’s white wall. “Lady Harriet, can you see yourself in the glass here?”

Harriet’s eyes swam with hesitation as she peered into the glass—

as if she wasn't used to seeing herself in the mirror. She really did look beautiful, but there was a slight stoop to her back that must have bothered the head maid.

"Please straighten your back and stick out your chest. Yes, just like that!"

"Th-this is hard..."

"Only when you first start. And hey, look in the window one more time."

Harriet did as Rishe asked, and her eyes widened in surprise. "Oh."

Of course, Harriet's hairstyle and dress were no different than they had been a moment ago, but there was a clear change in her appearance. The dress looked superb and better accentuated her figure, for starters. With her chest thrust out and her head lifted, her face looked brighter, the makeup around her eyes shining in the light.

"Don't you think the impression you give off has changed completely just with better posture?"

"I-It's true, it has..." Harriet blinked again and again.

"Maintaining perfect posture when you're not used to it is challenging," Rishe told her, smiling. "But if you think about how it improves the dress you're wearing, it's a little easier to make an effort, isn't it?"

Harriet appeared to consider Rishe's words as she watched herself in the glass. Then she looked down at her dress and smiled shyly. "Yes..."

"Oho!" When Rishe saw that smile, she hurried to whisper in the head maid's ear, "Miss Head Maid, did you see that just now?! Lady Harriet's bashful smile was so wonderfully cute!"

"Sh-she still has a long way to go! It's natural for her to smile sweetly in another country on a diplomatic visit!"

"It was wonderful, though, right?"

"W-well, that is true enough, I suppose!" the head maid huffed, then clapped a hand over her mouth as if Rishe had teased the words out. Still, she didn't intend to take the statement back.

Rishe's own smile grew wider at this development.

I'm glad Lady Harriet is enjoying herself even a tiny bit more. We must return to the castle for dinner, so we can't stay out for long, but...I'd like to go to all sorts of stores she'd be interested in.

What sort of store *would* Harriet like? Rishe had fun imagining the possibilities.

In addition to her new dress, Princess Harriet also carried a small purse. She had prepared it herself before their shopping trip. While Rishe and the head maid spoke, she turned her back to them and opened the purse, peering into it so that no one else could see inside.

“Money...”

Her purse was filled with coins. Each coin bore a simplified eagle design—Galkhein’s national symbol. Harriet ran her finger over the eagle’s wings.

“Galkhein’s money... Money, money, money...”

She shut the purse, her voice more hushed than a breath. She muttered to herself, the sea breeze and waves drowning out her next words.

“With this money, I can obtain what I’ve always wanted...”

They visited a few stores, and when evening came, Rishe and Harriet returned to the castle by carriage.

A maid welcomed them in the entrance hall and quietly relayed a message. “Welcome back, Lady Rishe. I know it’s sudden, but I have a message for you from Sir Oliver. His Highness Prince Arnold requests your presence.”

“Thank you. I’ll go right to his office. Lady Harriet, I’ll see you shortly.”

“Y-yes! Thank you so much!”

Harriet bobbed her head over and over again as Rishe left for

Arnold's office. She knocked on the door upon her arrival, and Oliver let her inside.

"Pardon me, Prince Arnold."

"Hey." Arnold was without his jacket, sitting in just a shirt as his pen glided across a piece of paper. The buttons at his collar were undone, exposing his hidden scar.

Oliver spoke up, exasperated. "Would you listen to this, Lady Rishe? I can't believe my lord! The moment I take my eyes off him, he jumps into the sea with his clothes on..."

"Huh?" Rishe flinched, then stiffly turned toward Oliver.

"Try as I might to pry the reason out of him, he won't say! I'm always telling him to take breaks, but I never expected such mischievous behavior..."

"Er, Oliver, His Highness wasn't to blame for that. It was—"

"Rishe." When Oliver wasn't looking at him, Arnold pressed his pointer finger to his lips. She took it to mean it was their little secret.



Huh?!

Though expressionless, he had the look of a child who had just pulled a prank. If Oliver was scolding Arnold, then Rishe had to explain things—but she couldn't force the matter if Arnold was telling her not to.

I don't know why he wants to keep it a secret, but I must tell Oliver the truth when Prince Arnold isn't around and apologize to him.

Oliver interrupted Rishe's musings. "Lady Rishe, please sit here. You too, my lord."

All three took their places on the couches sandwiching the low table. Arnold first and Rishe next to him, then Oliver on the opposite side.

"My lord and I have something we'd like to request of you, Lady Rishe. Could you contact Mr. Tully of the Aria Trading Company for us?"

"Mr. Tully?"

The attendant nodded and laid a piece of paper on the table. It was the chart of gold and silver prices Rishe had given Arnold earlier.

"We've investigated this data, and we believe that it takes into account all manner of world events."

I'm impressed. These two aren't merchants, but they know how much work goes into compiling this sort of data.

Oliver regarded Rishe with his gentle purple eyes and smiled. "You're already aware of the currency reminting. My lord?"

When prompted, Arnold gestured for him to continue. Oliver picked up a scroll on the table and spread it out before Rishe.

Rishe gasped at the beautifully intricate illustration. It was an eagle with wings spread wide, and even the feathers were strikingly detailed. Above the eagle, several flower petals fell from two crossed swords.

"It's stunning. Grand and dignified, but elaborate..." She was entranced by the image for a moment before she tilted her head to the side. "Do you mean to mint the new currency with this new, complex design?"

"Correct," Oliver said with a breezy smile, but this was an

incredible idea. “You never fail to surprise me, Lady Rishe. After all, currency has to be mass-produced, and each individual coin must be free of even the slightest imperfection.”

“Exactly. You’d have to make a prototype and a mold, but would such a complex design even transfer perfectly? Your minting process must be very refined.”

It clicked for her then. Rishe looked up at Arnold, and their eyes met—he’d been watching her from the start.

This is why Prince Arnold brought up Coyolles when he touched my ring yesterday!

She hadn’t been wrong about him considering Coyolles’s depleting silver and gold veins, but there was another thing Arnold had been thinking about at the time.

“You’re going to use our alliance with Coyolles for the reminting?!” she asked, and the prince regarded her fondly.

“That’s the very expression I thought you’d make.”

Rishe’s hands flew to her cheeks. *What kind of face am I making?!* Her happiness must have been plain for all to see. It embarrassed her, but there was nothing she could do.

I can’t believe Prince Arnold is relying on Coyolles...on Prince Kyle!

When she looked at Oliver, he nodded. He must have known why Rishe was so happy. “Just so you’re aware, it was my lord who brought up Coyolles’s name, not me.”

“I use what means are available to me. That’s all there is to it,” Arnold said bluntly, but Rishe was jubilant.

There’s something strange about this, though.

Oliver went on, unaware of Rishe’s prickling doubt. “The purpose of periodic reminting is to make counterfeiting more difficult. Since we’re going to remint, we might as well take the opportunity to make counterfeiting even harder. If we utilize Coyolles’s ability to create elaborate metalwork, then counterfeiters will have their work cut out for them. We’d like to confer with the Aria Trading Company about how to distribute our gold and silver to other countries once we’ve finished the reminting process, and about procuring the necessary materials.”

“If there’s something I can help with, I’ll spare no effort! I can

reach out to Mr. Tully right away, if you'd like." Rishe met Arnold's eyes again and voiced her earlier concern: "You two aren't sure about this, though, are you?"

Arnold grimaced, and Oliver's eyes nearly popped out. Judging by their reactions, Rishe had guessed right.

"What gave you that idea, Lady Rishe?" Oliver asked, flustered. Arnold scrutinized her in silence.

Under their gazes, Rishe said, "With technology from Coyolles, it will be possible to craft coins with this detailed design. Even so, it'll be a costly endeavor."

The expense to create something wasn't just made up of the cost of its materials. There was much more to budget for: materials acquisition, facilities, labor, transportation, and distribution. Gold and silver coins were no exception. If minting a coin cost more than the coin itself, then the country would literally lose more money than they made.

"You'd also like to discuss how to mitigate those costs with Mr. Tully, right? Depending on the Aria Trading Company's analysis of the costs, it's possible the whole reminting plan could be dropped."

"Well, well."

"Also... Prince Arnold." Rishe and Arnold locked gazes for the third time. "When I spoke to you about the reminting, and I asked if you planned to reduce the gold and silver content in Galkhein currency, your response seemed uncertain."

Indeed, it had been an uncharacteristically vague "I suppose so."

"At the time, I wondered if you were just hiding something from me—but if that were the case, I'm sure you would have hidden it better. Or you might've said something obviously facetious in response."

"..."

"I felt that, rather than something you were hiding, there was something you were worried about." Maybe that was the reason for his uncharacteristic answer.

Smiling softly, Oliver looked at Arnold. "Goodness, my lord. Your fiancée seems to have seen right through you. Why don't you reveal what you're thinking? Maybe I can help you as well."

Rishe didn't expect to hear that. "You don't know what he's thinking either?"

"Well, normally I would discuss things a little more with him, but my lord seems to have another idea this time."

Arnold, a bored expression on his face and his chin in his hand, just said, "It's a completely unrealistic plan."

This too was unlike him. Arnold was always realistic. Even his saying "a completely unrealistic plan" was strange.

"It's stupid. Practically fantasy. My 'other idea' is something I've already tossed out without consideration."

"Well, if you're that insistent, my lord..."

"Hold on, Your Highness!" Rishe said, drawing his attention. "If you put your mind to it, don't you think you could achieve it?"

The prince gaped at her. "What?"

Rishe believed in him, so she continued her explanation with unwavering seriousness. "Do you not believe that you have the power to make fantasy into reality, Your Highness? Especially now, when you're willing to work together with others like Coyolles and the Aria Trading Company?"

"Unbelievable." Arnold frowned. "You trust me that much?"

"Of course. After all, you've proven yourself to me since we first met two months ago." Rishe believed in Arnold's power not because she knew the future but because she'd seen what he could do firsthand. "You don't believe in your own power, Prince Arnold?"

Arnold's frown remained.

"Maybe what you consider fantasy isn't to someone else. It could be possible with the technique and knowledge someone else possesses. It could become more and more real the more people believe in it."

"There are no such people."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that. I mean..."

"Rishe." Arnold tilted Rishe's jaw to face him.

What's he doing this for? I'm not going anywhere.

In a deeper voice than usual, he asked her, "Who's going to believe in something that's intangible?"

Why do his eyes look so forlorn? Rishe tried to speak, but nothing came out of her mouth. She felt as if Arnold's gaze pinned her in place, keeping her silent.

"My lord."

Rishe flinched at Oliver's voice. With a click of his tongue, Arnold withdrew his hand from Rishe's jaw.

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

"Prince Arnold, Sir Oliver, if I could have a moment to discuss tomorrow's security."

Upon hearing a knight on the other side, Rishe stood. "I'll be going, then. I shall speak with the Aria Trading Company for you."

"I apologize, Lady Rishe."

"Please let me know if there's anything else I can do. Your Highness, I'll see you at dinner."

Arnold twined his fingers around Rishe's hand, telling her, "Later."

The dense air from earlier was gone now. He didn't look so forlorn, and he wasn't trying to prevent Rishe from speaking.

"Yes," Rishe said quietly, confused by his change in demeanor. She greeted the knights at the door and left the room.

I thought I might've upset him, but that doesn't seem to be the case. Is there another issue I'm not aware of? Hmm. What could it be?

As she thought, her head became full of Arnold. She wanted to know as much as she could about his thoughts and troubles. Because she was so preoccupied, she missed the stealthy presence beside her.

"Hey."

Rishe blinked in surprise as she was yanked behind a pillar. Raul pressed her back to the wall and covered her mouth with a large hand, smiling in his Curtis guise.

"It's just the two of us now, little lady."

"Mmph." Unable to protest, Rishe glared at him.

"I saw Harriet. Thanks for taking such good care of my 'little sister.'" In contrast to Rishe's fearsome scowl, Raul smiled with satisfaction. "Those eyes are great. Just my type."

He released her mouth at last, and Rishe regained the ability to speak. "Is it wise to act like this while you're dressed as Prince Curtis?"

"That voice is great too. Scold me more, would you?"

"You're incorrigible, you know that?" Rishe sighed, truly - exasperated at Raul's constant mischief. In her life as a hunter, he'd been a very dependable ally when she needed one. Now, she was baffled by how difficult he was to handle when he wasn't on her side.

Raul stared into her eyes, still holding her against the wall. "I do wish you wouldn't try to show Harriet a new world, however."

"What?" Rishe blurted, lured by the cryptic line.

"I'm telling you not to be so cruel," he replied, as frustratingly frivolous as ever. "That personality of hers is something she developed for her survival, you know? By taking all the blame, she shuts herself off from the rest of the world. If she can abide by her mother's teachings, then she won't realize what a piss-poor situation she's in."

"..."

"If she learns the happiness of standing tall and facing forward, then returns to her fiancé for a life of obedience, don't you think that'll be unbearably hard for her?" Raul smirked, his voice airy. "Or is that your plan?"

"Excuse me? What plan?"

"Well, to break Harriet's spirit, of course."

Rishe's eyes went round.

"You have such *good* eyes. You see everything a person takes pride in. What they're ashamed of. What they cling to. That's how you worm your way right into their heart, isn't it?" Raul's face was already close to hers, but he pressed even closer now. "People you see through with those eyes become hopeful—for what's important to them, for their pride, for a bright future..."

Rishe grimaced and shoved Raul's shoulder, but the man didn't budge.

His throat bobbed in a chuckle at her resistance. "It's good. It's very good. Especially since..." His red eyes saw straight through her. "You could break someone's spirit so easily, couldn't you?" He sounded just like a hunter with his prey in sight.

When she replied, Rishe spoke to the man as she did her chief in her fifth loop. "Look, Raul. You should stop doing that."

"Stop doing what?"

"Lying to yourself about things outside of work."

Raul's breath caught for a moment.

"They're not real lies, but they're not your real feelings either. You mix truth into lies and lies into feelings so much that you're not even sure how you feel yourself. Isn't that right?"

Indeed, she'd said the same thing in her fifth loop. Raul was always detached from the world around him, so much so that there was no substance to his soul. Their companions laughed it off as Raul just being himself, but that wasn't how it looked to Rishe. He appeared to be suffering, but he hid it all behind a smile and a lie. At times, his calm seemed to be a tight-fitting lid on deep, explosive rage.

I'm sure he'd deny it like he did back then.

She was prepared to be brushed off, but Raul's answer was different from the one he'd given her in her fifth life.

He narrowed his eyes and murmured, "Don't you think that it's all over as soon as someone sees through you?"

Rishe's lashes fluttered as she absorbed the statement. She'd come to expect his levity, but Raul was dead serious.

"I'm terrified of someone knowing everything there is to know about me...even more than not knowing myself."

Does he feel comfortable baring his soul to me because I'm a stranger to him in this life?

"Don't you feel the same way?" he asked, though it sounded hollow.

"No, I don't."

In her mind, she saw Arnold's profile on the beach earlier that day.

"There's someone to whom I wish I could confide all my secrets."

"But you haven't—which means you understand that telling the truth puts you at a disadvantage. So you're in no position to criticize me, are you?" Raul's red eyes pierced her to the core. "What does your

marriage with Galkhein's crown prince mean to you?"

Again, Rishe blinked in surprise.

"How does the woman in a political marriage feel? Do you fantasize about an old flame stealing you away during the ceremony?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You're so dense." A smile crept onto Raul's handsome face as he continued, his voice husky, "I'll say it plain. I'm thinking about snatching you up if you don't want to marry the crown prince."

Rishe was so astounded by his brazen proposal that she could only sigh. If anyone else heard this, it would escalate into an international incident. She continued pushing Raul's shoulder with all her strength. Her arm was starting to tremble and numb, but she pretended otherwise as she met his gaze squarely.

"I told you, you shouldn't put on acts like that."

"I'm worried about you. No wife will be happy in a political marriage."

"I've never once wanted him to make me happy."

A twisted smile appeared on Raul's face. "Oh?"

"I'm going to make a wonderful life for myself. No matter what disasters may befall me from marrying him, I'm not going to let it make me unhappy."

Even if she was dragged into a huge war. Even if she died because of that war. She would never lament choosing her path—this time, to being crown princess—like she had in all her other lives. As long as she met her end without regrets, she was certain she would live a life of joy.

"I still don't know what this marriage will mean for me, but I'm going to stay by his side even if he breaks it off."

No one could take her away.

"I'm going to be his bride. I've already chosen how I'm going to live this life."

She glared at Raul to emphasize her intent, and he smiled. But it wasn't the way he'd been smiling at her up until now as Raul. This was his smile as "Curtis." In that moment, Rishe noticed another person approaching. She hadn't picked up on it before because Raul had cleverly hoarded her attention.

“Prince Arnold.” Rishe frowned. Raul still had her pinned to the wall, a hand tight on her shoulder...and his face was far too close to hers.

Blue eyes stared daggers at Raul. Rishe shuddered at the tense air that had settled around them. There was no hint of strong emotion on Arnold’s face. His frigid gaze was merely leveled at Raul.

“Let go of her.”

It was a short phrase, but it rumbled in her eardrums. The words were directed at Raul, but even Rishe’s breath hitched. Raul must have felt even *more* pressure as the actual target.

“I’m terribly sorry, Prince Arnold.” Raul’s mouth twitched for just a second, but he shifted the movement into a gentle smile. “I have no excuse for my behavior.”

“Prince Curtis!” Rishe grimaced, worrying that Raul was just inviting further misunderstandings with his choice of words.

“I apologize, really. It’s just that your fiancée’s beauty is so dazzling.”

Seriously, what are you thinking?!

Wasn’t he supposed to be the eldest prince of Siguel right now? Raul’s disguises were perfect, but he’d ditched his caution to say and do things Curtis never would. Confused, Rishe put even more strength into her arm as she pushed against Raul.

“Did you not hear me?”

Arnold’s slow footsteps echoed down the hall. He loped forward, showing no indication that he was rising to Raul’s provocation. At a glance, his behavior was no different from the everyday, but the chill in his eyes and the rigid bloodlust in his voice overpowered Rishe.

“I told you to let go of my wife.”

Is he going to kill Raul? Rishe thought, panic rising.

Raul shrugged, then released Rishe. Arnold grabbed her as soon as she was free and pulled her to him. He was very gentle, but his strength also brooked no argument from her.

The prince peered down at her face, wrapped a gentle hand around the shoulder Raul had been gripping. “Did he hurt you?”

“Erm, no.”

“Did he touch you anywhere else?”

“Just my shoulder. Nothing else.”

Arnold’s shapely eyebrows bent. He seemed to be enduring something. “Did he make you uncomfortable in any other way?”

Rishe shook her head, and Arnold’s gaze slid away. It was the slightest gesture, yet the tension of the moment was unbearable.

He didn’t even spare Raul a glance. “I’ll take you to your room. Come on.”

As he took her hand, Rishe heard a quiet voice from behind her. “Your fiancée is precious to you, isn’t she?” Raul appeared to be riling Arnold up on purpose. “If I were in your place...I’m sure I would kiss Lady Rishe to stake my claim on her in front of a would-be rival.”

“Prince Curtis, that’s enough joking around—”

“Or maybe I would’ve cut the man down right here. It seems all the rumors about the cruel Crown Prince Arnold are unfounded.”

Raul’s needling was shameless at this point. Rishe was beside herself, unable to comprehend his actions.

Yet Arnold was calm. In fact, he regarded Raul with a smile of utter composure as he said, “I see. You must be here against your master’s wishes.”

At that, it was *Rishe* who gaped in surprise rather than Raul. The man himself was merely confused. She couldn’t read his mind or anything, but he had to have considered this a possibility.

“May I ask what that means?”

“You’re not Curtis Samuel O’Fallon. You’re just an impostor pretending to be him. Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

Raul’s disguise had been seen through at last. It was Rishe’s first time witnessing such a thing, including the whole span of her fifth loop.

Perplexed, Raul said, “Prince Arnold, I assure you, I have no idea what you’re—”

“All it takes is a little observation to tell when someone’s impersonating someone else. There’s a big difference between natural mannerisms and deliberate ones.” Arnold uttered these words as if they were as normal as a change in weather. “The same goes for your voice. When you change the way you use your vocal chords, it creates a

minute distortion in the sound. It's incredibly irritating to listen to."

"Heh... Ha ha ha!" Raul laughed in his real voice, but the sound was a little dry. "You're a monster." Clearly awed, he shrugged and said blithely, "Why'd you leave me alone when you knew...? Ahh, of course. To find out Siguel's true intentions."

"I don't need to explain myself to you. Let's go, Rishe."

"Say. If she's truly important to you, don't you think you should let her go instead of forcing her into a political marriage? I think she'd be more thankful to you that way."

His voice prodded Rishe from behind. Rishe hated Raul's presumption that he knew what *she* wanted.

"Raul! I—" Rishe pivoted to protest, but Arnold beat her to it. He turned just his head to shoot a glare at Raul while still clutching Rishe's wrist.

"No matter how much she hates me because of this marriage, I don't intend to let her go. She *will* be my wife." His eyes were sharp now, much fiercer than they had been before.

A deep sadness wrung Rishe's heart. *Why?*

Raul's smile grew even more warped as he taunted Arnold. "How awful. You know you'll make her unhappy, but you'll force her to be your wife anyway."

"That's right. Let's go, Rishe." Arnold began to walk, pulling her along.

She wanted to say *something* to him, but she couldn't dredge up a single word. Hanging her head, Rishe simply followed behind him.

There's that pain in my chest again. The throbbing ache made it hard for her to breathe.

Arnold kept his silence. He didn't turn around until they'd reached the door to their room on the fourth floor.

"I'm sorry." He released her wrist, only to take her hand in the same manner as when he'd put on her ring. "I shouldn't have been so rough."

Rishe said nothing.

"Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head.

Arnold apologized, but he *hadn't* been rough with her. It was true that he'd been rather forceful, but his grip hadn't hurt or left any sort of mark on her skin. It wasn't Rishe's *wrist* that was in pain.

"Why do you say things like that?" She heard the sadness leaking into her voice, but she couldn't put a lid on her feelings anymore.

"Don't worry," Arnold said gently, reaching out to stroke Rishe's cheek. "Just because I'm not letting you go doesn't mean I plan to restrict you."

Rishe's head drooped so low, her hair fell around her face. Arnold brushed it aside, his touch feather-light.

"I want you to keep telling me all your wishes. I swear to grant you anything in my power."

That wasn't what she meant. "You said I was going to hate you because of this marriage."

"I did," Arnold affirmed even as he tucked Rishe's coral hair behind one ear. "You weren't afraid to marry me?"

It was as if he were comforting a child. The way he looked at her, spoke to her, and touched her, all felt like he was consoling her. And that just made Rishe feel like a spoiled girl who'd thrown a tantrum. She placed her own hand over Arnold's. She couldn't bring herself to face him directly, so she just looked up at him through her lashes.

"Your Highness...you're a fool."

Arnold's eyes flew wide in shock.

"You absolute fool... I can't believe you," Rishe said, although her complaints came weakly. "I can't stand it when you're so nice to me."

Sometimes, the prince was cruel. Distancing himself through his speech helped him conceal his true emotions. Yet, right now, he was being considerate of Rishe's feelings. He genuinely believed Rishe feared her marriage to him.

"How could I be afraid to be your bride?" Rishe glared at him. Although she didn't want to, she knew she'd make an even more pathetic face if she didn't. She tightened her grip on his hand, practically pressing it to her cheek. "I accepted your proposal, didn't I?"

She wished she could cover his hand completely, but it was too

large, too masculine, so the best she could do was lay her fingers between his from over top. "Whatever happens, I will *never* hate you. There's no need for you to speak as if I will!"

"Rishe."

When he called her name, the throbbing pain in her chest intensified. She reflexively pushed his rugged hand closer to her cheek. While she didn't want him to see her face, she also didn't want to let go. She had no idea where to begin processing the heady mix of emotions whirling inside her.

"Do you feel..." Rishe was afraid to ask the question, but she didn't know *why*. She pushed the fear down and slowly met his gaze. "Do you feel an obligation to me because of this marriage?"

This time, Arnold broke eye contact. His long eyelashes cast shadows on his cheeks. There was always a sharp light in his eyes, but now they seemed fathomless.

"Back then, I would have done anything to make you my wife." He must have been talking about when he proposed.

Only two months have passed since then, but it feels like it happened a lifetime ago.

Maybe Arnold felt the same way. His voice was gentler than usual. "I was the one begging you, and you were the one making the decision." Arnold traced Rishe's cheek with his thumb. "Our positions were never equal. Do you understand?"

Rishe shook her head. She didn't. He treated her like a child who didn't know anything, and she couldn't help but play the role.

"I..." Rishe began, her voice dangerously close to leaking all her pain. "For every selfish request I make, I want to grant your desires too."

She wanted to give back as much as she took.

"In a marriage that's a contract between two countries, we should each stand to gain something. Yet I've done nothing but take from you this whole time. If this is supposed to be a political marriage, it's far too tilted in my favor."

Rishe removed his hand from her cheek and wrapped their fingers together. "If there are things you want of me," she said, struggling to endure her pain, "then I want to give them to you just as you've given

to me.”

She wanted to cry but felt so far from tears. There was a cloying sadness in her heart, of losing the place where she belonged. The feeling intensified with each heartbeat.

“Prince Arnold...please.” Rishe looked into his blue eyes, willing him to hear her earnest plea. For some reason, she felt disconsolate saying his name. She’d never felt this way in any of her previous lives. It felt like praying as she took a weak breath.

“Rishe.” Arnold didn’t avert his gaze, and his voice was still gentle. “I’m not marrying you for political reasons.” He bent down and brought his lips to her ear, close enough to kiss it. She gasped, his husky voice tickling her eardrum as his breath tickled her skin. “I don’t want anything from you. You couldn’t make me name something if you begged me.”

That lanced her heart right through.

Arnold pulled away with a smile, gaze firmly locked on hers. There was a dark light in his eyes, almost self-deprecating. He turned Rishe’s own words right back at her. “Do you hate me?”

He gently ran his thumb over Rishe’s lips, as if he wished to pry the words out. Of course, she hated being told he didn’t want anything from her, so she itched to say yes out of spite—but she couldn’t. She was lost, with no past knowledge to rely on in this moment.

It’s so cruel of him to hide what he’s really thinking.

Rishe already knew that, so she’d always believed in the sincerity of his actions over the false malice of his words. However, she’d sensed absolute sincerity in what he just said.

I know that his not wanting anything from me comes from a place of kindness.

That was why it hurt a lot more than his usual callousness.

“No matter how much she hates me because of this marriage...”

Arnold was truly prepared for Rishe to hate him.

He told me I didn’t need to be resolute to become his wife!

As she recalled what else he’d said in the past, her vision wavered.

Oh no!

She didn't want him to witness her being any more pathetic, but she didn't want to just walk away from the conversation either.

Rishe's thoughts spun. Contemplating her next action, she slowly moved her hand up next to her head, palm facing Arnold.

"What's that mean?" he asked dubiously.

She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Prince Arnold."

What she was about to do was terrible, but if she just walked away, they would continue talking in circles. At the same time, she didn't want to run off without another word. She had no idea if she'd be able to do this right, but Rishe decided to initiate it anyway.

Looking straight at Arnold, she declared, "As of this moment... we're having our first fight!"

Several seconds passed, and then Arnold stared at her as though she were a complete stranger. "What did you just say?"

"I said, *we're having our first fight!*"

Sadness clawed at Rishe, but she squared her shoulders and made her intent clear to her fiancé.



Chapter 4

THAT NIGHT, Rishe knocked on the door to Arnold's office and thrust out a basket at Oliver when he opened it.

"Oliver, please give this to Prince Arnold."

"Um, Lady Rishe...what might this be?" Oliver smiled, but he was clearly hesitant to accept the basket. He must have heard something about the situation from Arnold.

"I made sandwiches as a late-night snack for His Highness."

"A late-night snack, you say..." Still wearing a confused smile, Oliver tilted his head. "Perhaps this is too forward of me, but aren't the two of you fighting?"

"Yes, it's as you say." Rishe nodded sharply for dramatic effect, thinking about the events of the last few hours.

After initiating her fight with Arnold, Rishe found herself at a complete loss. She had no idea how to execute a fight among lovers. She'd shut herself up in her room and sifted through her memories, but found nothing that served as a good example.

My knight captain was kicked out of his house, but I don't want to do that to Prince Arnold. Also, my home is too far away to say I'm going back. I saw someone turn all her husband's shirts inside out once, but I don't want to interfere with his getting ready in the morning. That would only create more trouble for Oliver.

Her thoughts had gone around and around for some time. With the available options still on her mind, she'd joined her maids for dinner. They'd been surprised to see her, but when she explained that she was fighting with Arnold, they understood immediately. Eventually, the strategy Rishe decided upon was this:

"On the bread of the sandwiches, I've written a disparaging comment with sauce."

"A disparaging comment. On the bread. With sauce."

"Yes. It says, 'Your Highness, you idiot!'"

Now she could hold her head high and say she was truly fighting

with Arnold. There were plenty of other things she wanted to say to him, of course, but they were far too difficult to write with sauce. She'd decided to get her point across with something simple.

"Er..." Oliver made a strange face, then cleared his throat—and the air with it. He reformed his awkward smile and asked, "Lady Rishe, you went out of your way to cook just so you could fight with my lord?"

Rishe pursed her lips, letting her head droop. "If it's just putting things between bread, I should be able to prepare a late-night snack without anything catastrophic happening..."

"Pfft!" Oliver clapped a hand over his mouth, shoulders shaking. "Ahem! My apologies. Anyway, my lord said he would be working late tonight, so I'm sure he would appreciate a snack."

What?! But I wrote something mean with the sauce! Rishe pouted, her conscience wounded. She wanted Arnold to enjoy something better than her terrible cooking, but they were fighting. *Yes, that's right—we're fighting!*

"Incidentally, did my lord have anything to say in regard to this fight?"

"Just 'very well.'"

Once she made her declaration, the prince had gazed at her tenderly, stroking her hair. Then he'd spun right around and headed to his office. Rishe chose not to mention the hair-petting bit.

Oliver tapped his chin. "I see, I see... Oh, don't mind me. Just considering everything that must get done before I can retire for the night."

An attendant's work was never done, and Rishe's fight with Arnold was sure to affect Oliver.

"I'm sorry. I didn't intend for my selfishness to cause problems for you."

"Think nothing of it. You have something you mean to get across with this fight, right? Then there's no problem, really."

Rishe didn't know why, but Oliver truly seemed to believe that. Relief washed over her, and she snuck a glance at the closed door behind him.

"Are you curious about how my lord is doing?"

“Yes.”

“Then I suppose I am duty-bound to keep it a secret.” Oliver’s response surprised her, but his smile turned sweet. “Don’t worry. To keep things fair, I won’t say anything to him about you either. Ah, it seems your escorts have arrived.”

He gestured down the hall, where Rishe’s maids stood. They were carrying something Rishe had given them, patiently waiting for Rishe’s conversation to end.

“Ugh... Then I’ll excuse myself.”

“Very well. Thank you for the delivery.”

Oliver bowed, and Rishe strode over to her maids. Watching from a distance, she could see how worried they looked. She apologized, then led them to Harriet’s room.

When they reached the door, Rishe thanked them, took what they’d brought, and sent them on their way. Left by herself in the hallway, she forgot her fight with Arnold for the time being and knocked on the door.

It opened, and Elsie’s face appeared. “We’ve been waiting for you, Lady Rishe!”

Elsie had come to Harriet’s room precisely one hour earlier. Rishe wanted to ask how it had gone, but she realized that Elsie was already *giving* her the answer. Her face was glowing with anticipation. Rishe didn’t let her wait any longer and looked past her, into the room.

“Wow!”

Standing there in a cute, mint-colored nightdress was Harriet.

“Th-thank you for coming, Lady Rishe...”

Harriet was in front of a couch, her back ramrod straight as she fidgeted with her sleeves. The nightdress reached down to her calves, and its fabric billowed below her bust to flatter her waistline. It also complemented her green eyes and blonde hair. Her golden bangs were bound in a loose braid to finish off the look.

Her face was visible, in other words. Rishe was delighted to see the same green eyes as the ones belonging to the real Prince Curtis.

“Lady Harriet, you look amazing!”

“Urk! Th-that’s not... I mean, um...” Harriet covered her eyes out

of habit, but she quickly—if jerkily—forced her hands to her sides and bowed to Rishe. “Thank you. Er, I’m sorry for borrowing Elsie from you. And, um, all the other things you’ve lent me, like the dresses and the purses...”

“Don’t let it bother you. It’ll be more fun if we have some direction for our shopping trips starting tomorrow.”

There was a pile of dresses on one of the couches in the VIP room. Rishe had brought them with her on this trip, but she didn’t plan to wear them all. If she was just going to bring them home without even putting them on, then she figured she might as well let Harriet try them on instead.

“Anyway, Lady Harriet, let’s cut to the chase.” Rishe glanced at the thing she’d given Elsie to hold—it was a large pot. With a grin, Rishe set it down on a table. Then she plucked a steaming-hot towel from inside. She’d heated it up in the kitchen while she made the sandwiches, and it was just about ready now.

“Please lie down on the couch, Lady Harriet!”

“Huh?! B-but, er, I couldn’t possibly do that in front of you, Lady Rishe!”

“Just sit here if you would. Now lie down, faceup, and put your hands on your stomach.” Rishe knew just how to lay a patient down from her time as an apothecary. She had Elsie wait out in the hallway and, once she had Harriet where she wanted her, placed the hot towel on her closed eyelids.

Harriet didn’t know what to make of the sensation. “Wagh! Wh-what is that? It smells kind of nice...”

“It’s a steamed towel with medicinal herbs inside it. The herbs help with muscle strain, and they’re more effective when you heat them up like this.”

“Muscles, you say... So, the muscles around my eyes?”

It was a thin towel, so the herbs would seep through it and into the skin below. The warmth of the towel would soothe the muscles as well.

“Just relaxing the tense muscles around your eyes should bring you considerable relief.”

Rishe was confident that she could alleviate some of the factors

contributing to the “scowl” that bothered Harriet.

“Aah...” Harriet sighed contentedly.

Chuckling to herself, Rishe began preparing the other medicine she’d brought. “Are you feeling relaxed?”

“I-It feels very nice...”

“That’s good. I’ll write down the herbs and what to mix them with for you.” The medicine clinked in a bottle as Rishe mixed it.

Harriet was silent for a short time before she said, “Um, Lady Rishe, i-is it all right if I ask you a question?”

“Of course! Ask away. I can tell you anything from how to grow herbs to how to heat up a towel.”

“Did something happen between you and your fiancé?”

A heavy silence settled on the VIP room.

After a beat, Harriet exclaimed, “I-I-I-I-I’m so sorry! That was so utterly rude of me!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine! I’m sorry to make such a fuss that a guest noticed it!” Rishe rushed to reassure Harriet before she could jump up, laying the princess back down on the couch. She hung her head, her voice coming out in a soft trickle. “We’re having a fight.”

“A fight...”

“I’m angry with him, so I threw a bit of a fit,” Rishe muttered, stirring the medicine with a glass stick. “It’s not even *really* a fight.” Her voice sounded even more dejected than she thought it would. “I told him I wanted to fight, and he just accepted it like he does any request of mine. I’m sure he doesn’t even intend to fight with me.”

After her little monologue, she realized with a start that telling Harriet all this would just confuse her. Before she could change the subject, Harriet spoke up.

“Could it be that you’re feeling lonely, Lady Rishe?”

A familiar pain flared in the left of her chest. “No, I...” She realized that she couldn’t deny it when she tried.

Harriet removed the towel from her eyes and sat up facing Rishe. “You’re angry with your fiancé?”

Rishe examined her feelings and shook her head. The feeling

swirling inside her wasn't anger—it was a more childish emotion. She was also aware that she was taking advantage of him.

"I'm sure I'm just sulking," she said with a self-deprecating smile. "Maybe I *am* lonely, just as you said. There's nothing I can do for him, so I feel helpless and pathetic. There's an ache in my chest so powerful, it's almost suffocating..."

She placed a hand over her heart and scrunched her brows.

"I'd like to do anything I can for him, but..." Her feelings didn't reach him. Arnold himself had rejected them.

"Lady Rishe...p-please forgive me if this is too forward...and I might be saying something that's totally off the mark, but, um..." Earnest olive eyes stared at Rishe with a strength she'd never seen before. "Perhaps he feels like he's already received *many* things just hearing you say that?"

Rishe boggled at Harriet.

The princess's anxious gaze dropped to her feet, but then she shook her head and lifted her gaze. "If someone who was close to me told me that...if I knew I had even one ally in this world who would say something like that to me, I...!" Harriet folded her hands on her chest, one on top of the other. "I think that would make me more than happy!"

At Harriet's words, Rishe came to an unexpected realization: *Even if I can't do anything, just telling him that I want to is enough?*

She blinked ever so slowly as it dawned on her.

Could my words really help Prince Arnold all on their own?

Though she wasn't confident about the idea, she did recall something else: the promise Arnold had made after proposing to her.

"So long as it is within my power, anything you want will be yours."

"Thank you, Lady Harriet." Rishe smiled at the trembling princess. "I've realized that I do want to have a proper conversation with him after what you said. I really appreciate your consideration."

"Y-you're too kind!" Harriet shook her head frantically, then took a deep breath to calm herself. "I-I've never thought that I wanted to fight with His Majesty...my fiancé." Harriet's eyes swam as she picked her words. "I would never be allowed to do such a thing in the first

place! All I can do is obey without complaint, like a doll...like a trophy queen..."

"Lady Harriet, you—"

"I thought I could never change what I was born with...that I was born a princess, that I was useless, that I had a face my fiancé would hate... I-I thought I had to apologize because it was all my fault... I always felt sorry for being born, but...but I realized something!"

There was a small light in Harriet's eyes as she stared at Rishe.

"From someone else's point of view, maybe it's just a small thing. Th-they might say I just dabbed on makeup, put on a nice dress, and braided my bangs, but...that's not how I see it."

That radiant light, normally hidden behind her bangs, glimmered with tears.

"I can look in the mirror now. I was so excited, I couldn't believe it when I got changed after my bath. My maids always kept their distance from me, but we talked so much today. It feels like everything's different after just a few small tweaks."

Harriet sounded like she was about to cry, but she held eye contact with Rishe and expressed her feelings in earnest.

"I thought that the things I was born with couldn't be changed... but maybe they can be, at least a little. That's a huge improvement, and it's something you did for me, Lady Rishe... It's like a dream to me that I can even think this way."

Quietly, oh so quietly, she continued, "So...I think your words will reach him. I'm sure they will."

Rishe gasped, and Harriet's hands flew to her face.

"I-I-I-I'm sorry, I said far too much! I'm so embarrassed! I just know I'm going to be thinking about this in bed all night!"

"Lady Harriet! Please calm down! It's all right, really!" Rishe had to console Harriet after she sank into the couch. It must have taken a great deal of courage for Harriet to say what she had, but she'd made sure to get the words out for Rishe's sake. That made Rishe smile. "Lady Harriet...I'm so glad we're friends."

"Friends?!" Harriet was dumbstruck, her olive eyes teary.

Lady Harriet is trying to change. The future that awaited her swept

through Rishe's mind. *Problem is, I have no idea what leads to her execution. I can't figure out Raul's actions either.*

"Pardon me, Lady Rishe..."

"Oh, Elsie!"

Rishe and Harriet startled at the knock on the door. When it opened, Elsie entered, shooting a nervous glance behind her. There was a group of women in white military uniforms there.

Those are Fabrannia's knights, not Siguel's.

"Ladies!" Harriet squeaked. "This is, er..."

"This won't do, Your Highness. His Majesty wished for you to have your guards at your side when you're with someone other than your brother or your maids."

Three of the knights stepped into the room. They weren't openly hostile to Rishe, but there was an imposing air about them.

Harriet shook her head, flustered. "B-but it's only Lady Rishe, so —"

"It matters not whom you are with."

"It's all right, Lady Harriet." Rishe smiled and put a lid on the mixed medicine. "I should be taking my leave anyway. Please put some of this medicine on your eyelids before you sleep tonight. I don't want these dresses and purses to be in your way, so I'll take them with me."

"Ah! At least let me help!" Harriet stood and began to gather up the dresses and purses strewn throughout the room. Rishe accepted the offer, and she and Elsie took the garments and bags when they were done.

"Good night, Lady Harriet." Rishe then addressed the guards. "I'm sorry for the trouble so late at night."

"L-Lady Rishe! Um...really, thank you so much!"

"I should be the one thanking you, Lady Harriet." She thought her fight would be able to make some progress after receiving Harriet's words of encouragement.

The princess hung her head, embarrassed, then lowered into a curtsy. "Good night, Lady Rishe."

"Same to you. See you tomorrow." Rishe wanted to wave to

Harriet, but her hands were full. They left the room and stepped into the hall, with Harriet seeing them off. “Those aren’t too heavy, are they, Elsie?”

“No, I’m fine! What about you, Lady Rishe?”

“I’m all right. It’s late, so let’s just drop these off and worry about organizing them tomorrow.”

As they walked down the hallway side by side, Rishe didn’t notice the way Harriet watched them go.

Once they’d dropped everything off in her dressing room, Rishe parted with Elsie and returned to her bedroom, sighing to herself.

I suppose Prince Arnold must still be working.

Alone in their double room, she found the silence deafening, which just made her remember something else. Something she would rather not think about.

The ghost!

In a flurry, she lit all the lamps in the room and fled under the covers. She stuck her head under the blanket, trying to escape from the crash of the waves, but her solitude still weighed heavily on her.

Rishe got up and out of bed, wearing the covers around her like a shawl. She went over to the window—or rather, to the bed that Arnold had slept in last night. Rishe herself had changed out the covers, the sheets, and the pillow for fresh ones this morning, so nothing Arnold slept on remained. Nevertheless, she felt surrounded by his presence as she settled into his bed, letting out a relieved sigh.

I doubt His Highness will come back here, she thought, burying her face in the pillow. I wrote something mean on his bread, and wanting him to sleep near me is just selfish.

She sighed again.

He’s not pushing himself, is he?

Rishe wished she’d at least asked Oliver whether Arnold was physically well.

He got wet in the rain today, and then he went in the ocean right after. Even for someone as fit as him, pulling so many late nights for work will only drain his stamina.

Worried as she was, she soon found it harder and harder to string her thoughts together. She was just as exhausted as he would be, after all.

“Your Highness, I...”

She knew there was no way Arnold was coming back, but she couldn’t help waiting for him. Rishe slowly closed her eyes and tried to fool the part of her heart that was ready and willing to wait.

A few hours must have passed by the time Rishe next opened her eyes. *Oh, I fell asleep.*

It was the middle of the night. She blinked a few times, and right when she was about to doze back off, she felt someone’s presence at her side.

Arnold was sleeping right next to her.

Wh-why?! What is Prince Arnold doing here?!

She sprang up, fully jolted out of her stupor, and scrutinized Arnold where he lay on his back with his eyes closed.

And he’s sleeping in the same bed as me?!

Was that because Rishe was using his bed? He must have returned after finishing his work and didn’t know what to do when he saw Rishe asleep. She didn’t know why he hadn’t simply picked the other bed in the room, but regardless of the reason, Arnold was sleeping beside her. She was in a complete fluster now.

Anyway, I must make sure I don’t wake him.

Since Rishe was camped out in the middle of the bed, Arnold slept on the edge. She worried he didn’t have enough room, so she tried to scoot over to the other side.

I didn’t think he would come back here today.

The moonlight pouring into the room from the windows went straight through the thin summer curtains. It bathed the bedroom in a dim light, casting shadows on Arnold’s pale cheeks from his long lashes.

Did he do it because he knows I'm afraid of ghosts?

She was almost sure of it. He had kept his promise that he would sleep with Rishe. The thought squeezed her heart in a vise as she clutched the covers.

I must go back to my own bed. I must!

Rishe knew that, yet she had a hard time making even the smallest move. Leaving would only make her lonely; perhaps she longed to keep watching his face as he slept.

Just then, Arnold's shapely brows furrowed just the slightest bit. Had he woken up? Rishe froze, but he did not stir. His forehead shone with sweat. She found it strange at first, then realized it was only natural. He may have looked like a sculpted god, but Arnold was as human as she was. The beads of sweat made that more obvious.

It is stuffy in here.

She glanced at the window. It was shut because she'd been afraid to open it when she was alone. Arnold might have left it closed out of consideration for her. Though it was night, it was still the seventh month, and it would be difficult to sleep in a room with the window closed.

I should make sure his sleep is at least restful.

To do that, she had to make the room a little more comfortable. Rishe made up her mind to get out of the bed. She feared approaching the window but feared opening the curtain even more. She had a feeling that, if she opened it even the slightest bit, she would lock eyes with something beyond. Unluckily, it was at just that moment that a shadow passed beyond the curtains.

Rishe's heart almost stopped. She clutched at the black sword she'd grabbed and kept careful watch over the window.

It's fine. The only thing that moves that way is a bat.

That certainly matched the knowledge she'd picked up in her fifth loop, but she was still scared.

It's not a ghost! It's not a ghost! Rishe told herself. She held her breath and stood up, her whole body tense as she reached between the curtains. She groped around for the lock, unlatched it, and opened the window.

Slowly, quietly, so that he doesn't wake up...

The ocean breeze swept in, rustling the curtains. Rishe exhaled at last and backed away from the window. She slipped back to the bed, let go of the sword, and settled back in next to Arnold.

There! I opened the window and there's nothing outside. Problem solved!

Rishe tried to convince herself of that as she sat up in bed. She peered down at Arnold's face, careful not to disturb his sleep. Sweat had plastered his bangs to his forehead. She wanted to brush them aside, but her hand stopped halfway toward him.

A pained gasp escaped Arnold's lips. The sea breeze brushed against his sweaty skin, but his frown deepened. Maybe the sweat on his forehead wasn't from the summer heat after all.

Is he dreaming?

Again, she reached out to Arnold. If it was a bad dream, she wanted to shake him awake. But if it wasn't, then she wanted him to get as much sleep as possible. Trapped between those feelings, she hesitated to do either.

A moment later, her world flipped upside down.

"Eep!"

Something grabbed her wrist and pressed down on her shoulder. She sank back onto the bed, unable to lift a finger to resist as a weight settled on top of her. Both her arms were pinned on either side of her head, and she stared up into the sharp eyes of a carnivore.

Those icy eyes peered down at Rishe, widening only a split second later. As if speaking to himself, Arnold murmured, "Rishe..." He sounded like he was making sure of something.

Rishe kept her gaze on him, unresisting as he held her there. She let out her pent-up breath, went limp against the bed, and responded, "Yes, Prince Arnold?"

Arnold frowned, lowering himself over Rishe and collapsing on top of her.

"What is it, Your Highness?"

His throaty voice whispered into her ear, "I'm sorry..."

She flinched and squirmed at the ticklish sensation, but she

couldn't move with Arnold on top of her.

"Your hands..." Her eyes flicked to a pinned wrist. She could hardly even beg with him pressed so close against her. "Let go of me."

There was a pause after her request.

"Right." Arnold spoke slowly, enunciating each word. "I know."

Even on top of her, Arnold wasn't heavy; he must have been taking care not to crush her. He stayed there as he released her wrists. His fingers came away so slowly, it seemed as though he didn't want to let her go. She felt like he'd been holding her tightly, but there wasn't even a mark when he pulled his hands away. Rishe studied her unblemished wrist with unfocused eyes.

Eventually, Arnold sat up, freeing her. Rishe waited a moment before she sat up as well. She knelt in front of him and, with her newly freed hands, pulled Arnold into an embrace. Arnold gasped just beside her ear. She was only able to hold him like this because he'd let her go.

Rishe looped one arm around Arnold's back and tenderly stroked his black hair with the other. "Did you have a bad dream?"

It was a question one asked of a child, but Rishe felt it necessary. Even if it was rude and required some courage, she couldn't help wanting to embrace Arnold. He would deny it. She was ready for that, ready to be pushed away—but Arnold continued to let her hold him and lowered his gaze.

"I was dreaming about the past." His hands slid around her back. "It all went away thanks to you."

He wasn't embracing her; in fact, he was barely touching her. But it seemed like permission to Rishe, so she held on to him tighter.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness." She continued holding him and petting his hair. "It's because I made it hard for you to sleep."

Arnold huffed a short sigh and said, "This isn't out of the ordinary." Gentler, he added, "It's not your fault."

She remembered something he'd told her once. During their visit to the Grand Basilica, when Rishe had injured herself and they'd slept in the same bed together, he said he didn't have any strange dreams afterward.

The dreams Prince Arnold fears are dreams of the past.

Rishe's heart throbbed when she thought about what Arnold had told her of his younger years.

Does he dream about all the siblings murdered before his eyes?

Arnold had seen with his own eyes an event too terrible for Rishe to imagine.

Or does he dream about his mother, who hated him?

The prince had gotten the scar on his neck when he was young. There were many other things in Arnold's past that Rishe didn't know about.

I can't ask about them, though.

The peaceful roar of the waves filled the room. The room quieted, feeling somehow more hushed than silence.

Rishe shifted back and studied Arnold. His face, devoid of expression, stared back at her—at once empty of emotion and thick with it. His blue irises seemed more boundless than usual. In the moonlight from the window, those bottomless pools appeared faint and transparent.

"The ocean..." She stroked Arnold's hair again. "It was fun playing in it, wasn't it?"

Maybe he found it baffling that she would bring something like that up for no apparent reason.

There isn't much I can do right now, is there?

She had no right to know what Arnold had been dreaming about, no right to talk about it with him. Thus, she at least wanted to take his hand and lead him somewhere far away from that dream.

If Prince Arnold's terrible memories won't go away, then... Rishe wanted to overwrite them with emotions furthest away from the ones bound to the memories. She hoped that she could transform even just one of his dreams into something else. It was with this prayer in her heart that she recalled their time on the beach earlier that day.

Arnold's expression didn't change, but at length, he said, "When I remembered that beach was out there..." Rishe tilted her head, and, still expressionless, Arnold continued, "It occurred to me that you might like it."

Surprised, she blinked her wide eyes.

“It’s just scenery to me, but...I thought you would find it beautiful.” Arnold’s tone was indifferent. He spoke as if nothing he said mattered, but he still made his feelings known. “Even if I didn’t understand.” He caressed her cheek. “But when I think about what might make you happy, I feel like I can understand a little.”

Rishe blinked again, not quite believing what was happening.

“It’s not just because you said you wanted to come here.” At last, he was answering the question she posed to him earlier. “I brought you to that beach because I wanted to show it to you.”

Arnold had once told her that he couldn’t feel the same way about the things she valued. To him, fireflies resembled the fires of war, and the sight of the capital was detestable. Yet he’d wanted to show Rishe the ocean because he thought she’d like it.

“I’m happy that you brought me there.” Rishe spoke slowly, pushing against the threat of her voice trembling. “I really am. So very happy.” She searched long and hard for the words she wanted to say to him, but in the end, she was only able to repeat clumsy sentiments. “I’m still happy...so happy I could cry...”

She wanted to put her arms around him again so badly, but before she could, Arnold pulled her into his instead.

“Oh, Prince Arnold...” Rishe was surprised, but she didn’t attempt to push him away.

Arnold tightened his grip on her and bent down, whispering in her ear, “You should resist more when someone shoves you down or wraps their arms around you.”

Rishe stubbornly embraced Arnold herself. “I trust you not to mistreat me, Your Highness.”

His lips curled into a self-effacing smile. “You believe in me that much, do you?”

“Of course I do. You know, you asked me who’d believe in something intangible.” Rishe disagreed with him there. “I’m afraid of ghosts. They may be intangible, but I believe they exist, and I’m frightened of them.”

She put into words the embarrassing truth that she would bare to him and him alone.

“And what about the faith people have in the Crusade Church?”

You saw it for yourself in the Holy Kingdom of Domana. That's real, isn't it?"

Arnold, who was said to have inherited the blood of the goddess himself, lapsed into thoughtful silence.

"Your desire to show me the ocean was also intangible yet real."

She spoke softly, running her hand through his hair to comfort him. "I believe in those feelings of yours. I'll tell you as many times as I must! I want to grant your desires too."

Maybe mere words would support him. Thinking about what Harriet told her, Rishe looked Arnold square in the eye and asked, "If I do that, will you believe at some point?"

"In you?"

"No." She didn't mind if he didn't believe in her. There was something else she wanted Arnold to understand. "That it's okay for you to want things as well, Prince Arnold."

Arnold sucked in a breath and held Rishe closer to him. "I've never desired anything from another person before." His voice was husky as it rumbled in her ear. "You're the only thing I've tried to bring to my side, though I know I have no way to keep you there."

"Prince Arnold, please..." That familiar ache in her chest, up and to the left, stabbed at her.

Oblivious to Rishe's feelings, Arnold whispered, "Be my wife." His words were as soft as a kiss. "I don't want anything more than that right now."

"Ngh..." The pain was so bad, Rishe dammed her tears in - desperation. She clung to Arnold's back and somehow managed to say, "You're not selfish enough."

Arnold chuckled, that same self-deprecating smile on his face. "You can't say that when I've forced you to marry me."

He really did think of their marriage in those terms. It irked Rishe, and she pouted. "I had the last say about accepting your proposal."

Regardless of what she said, it didn't resonate with him. He laid a hand on her head as if to say she was wrong. "If you didn't agree to it, I still would have taken you."

Stuck between his arms, Rishe could only listen.

“No matter what I had to do...no matter how much you protested.”

Rishe frowned and squirmed in his arms, trying to back away from him, but Arnold wouldn't let her. Still holding her, he lay down on his side in the bed. His arms loosened a little as Rishe settled in.

Rishe studied his face. “We're still fighting.”

“Oh?”

“Because you refuse to see things my way.” Rishe put all her dissatisfaction into the phrase.

Arnold chuckled. “Very well.” He tucked Rishe's hair behind her ear. When she flinched from the contact, he said soothingly, “I'll play along as long as you want.”

He wasn't even treating it like a real fight. That frustrated her to no end, but she couldn't protest because he was regarding her so tenderly.

“Just close your eyes for now.” He put his arm around her again and patted her back. “We can continue our fight tomorrow.”

She didn't think that was how fights were supposed to work, but she swallowed her argument and clung tight to him, closing her eyes. Fighting was hard.

Rishe fell back asleep thinking about what she could do to get Arnold to understand how she felt.

The next morning, when Rishe opened her eyes, Arnold was no longer in the room. She sat up in bed, blinking lazily as she absorbed his absence. Due to her sluggishness, she took about twice as long as usual to get ready.

Once dressed, she looked at the bedside table and found several documents sitting there. They were the currency exchange records that Rishe had asked Arnold to get her. Rishe picked them up, rifled through them, and exhaled.

I've got to thank him.

There was a knock on the door. Only one other person knew Rishe and Arnold were sleeping here, so when she opened the door, she wasn't surprised to see Oliver.

"Good morning, Lady Rishe. I'm here because my lord kicked me out of his office."

Rishe cocked her head, curious. The attendant flashed his refreshing smile with a hint of wryness.

"It happens often when he wishes to concentrate on his work. Sometimes, the mere presence of another person distracts him."

"I see."

"Since I've got some spare time, I wondered if there was anything I can do for you, Lady Rishe. Is there anything you require assistance with here, where you cannot call your maids?"

The reason Rishe slept in the same room as Arnold was because she feared ghosts. Her current sleeping quarters were kept secret even from the maids. Oliver knew this, so he was being considerate of her.

Rishe prepared to refuse him but reconsidered. "Well, Oliver, I don't suppose I could ask you to help me with some physical labor?"

The dresses and purses she'd lent Harriet yesterday had been left in a haphazard pile in Rishe's dressing room. They weighed a decent amount, so it would be of much help to have a man assisting her with the cleanup.

"I would be happy to. I have breakfast ready for you as well."

"Thank you. Let's get going, then."

She and Oliver made for the dressing room on the first floor. On their way, they heard the pitter-patter of light footsteps approaching them. Elsie rushed up from downstairs, nearly bursting into tears when she spotted Rishe.

"Lady Rishe!"

"What's the matter, Elsie?"

"I-I'm sorry to bother you with this so early in the morning, but... Lady Rishe, there's something I...I...!"

Rishe ran to meet Elsie where she panted on the steps. "You're so pale! It's all right, Elsie, take your time."

Shoulders heaving, the maid thrust out a burlap sack to Rishe. “I was sorting through the purses from yesterday in the dressing room when I found this...”

The sack had a cord around it, but Rishe could see through the loosened opening. Her eyes bugged out at the glittering sight. “Galkhein gold coins?!”

Indeed, the burlap sack was filled with gold coins that bore an eagle design. Moreover, Fabrannia’s national emblem was embroidered on the sack. It was obvious at a glance that this was not one of Rishe’s belongings.

This was among my purses because...!

Rishe understood the situation in an instant. This bag belonged to Harriet. The contents were the Galkhein currency the king of Fabrannia had entrusted to her. It had ended up in one of Rishe’s purses yesterday, in Harriet’s room. The question was *why* it had ended up there.

Did it just get mixed up with them when we were leaving the room because we were in a hurry? No, that’s not possible.

The purses had all been left on a couch in the room. It was hard to imagine Harriet just leaving this sack of money lying around like that.

“Elsie, do you remember which purse this was in?”

“Yes. It was the red one with the thin chain for a handle.”

Rishe summoned her memories of the night before and drew a mental picture of Harriet’s room. The red purse was on the center of the couch, surrounded by all the other purses.

Back then...

The Fabrannian knights had shown up, and Rishe had vacated the room. It wasn’t Rishe or Elsie who had gathered up the purses on the couch but Harriet.

Lady Harriet put this gold into my purse!

Rishe regretted her own inadequacy from the bottom of her heart. She’d been too preoccupied with the knights to pay attention to Harriet’s actions. Though she knew the princess had done it, she still didn’t know why.

“What do we do, Lady Rishe?” Pale-faced, Elsie voiced her worry. “People will think you stole this money from Lady Harriet!”

That would undoubtedly lead to a serious international incident.

Listening to all this, Oliver turned to Rishe, his characteristic smile gone from his face. "Could I trouble you for the details on this matter?"

Oliver was usually composed at all times, but there was tension in him now. Rishe had heard that he'd been on the path to becoming a knight before an injury cut that path off for him ten years ago, but he must have had great skill. Still, whatever Oliver heard would end up getting back to Arnold, so Rishe had to be careful with her words.

Before answering, she studied the sack in her hands and gasped. *It can't be!*

She opened the sack and plucked out one of the coins. The surface, carved with the emblem of Galkhein, shone mirror-like.

The reason Lady Harriet would do something that might implicate me or Elsie...

Her own eyes stared back from her reflection in the coin. At that moment, the information she'd asked Arnold to collect flashed through her mind. She put it together with what she knew from her previous lives and came to one conclusion.

So that's why you're executed in the future, Lady Harriet.

Rishe steadied herself with a breath, then looked up at Oliver. "I'll explain everything at some point, but could I ask you for a favor first?"

She took a moment to calm the panicking Elsie and then sent Oliver to take action. Though she couldn't keep what she was about to do from Arnold, she didn't want to interrupt him when he was concentrating on his work. If he found out about the matter on his own, it would just cause him a different sort of trouble.

Oliver agreed to put off his report to Arnold while Rishe made several preparations. And after breakfast, Rishe visited not Harriet but someone else.

"Well, hey. I'm thrilled you'd go out of your way to come see little old me."

Rishe sat across the table from Raul in his Curtis disguise. Oliver stood behind her. She'd set up this meeting with Raul beforehand, so he had no guard detail.

Raul prepared some tea for her. "It's an unusual color, isn't it? I

used to drink it in my homeland.”

The jade-green tea had a distinctive aroma. Raul had enjoyed this tea in Rische’s fifth loop as well and had often shared it with their troop.

“How about you, Mr. Silver-haired Attendant? Would you like a cup?”

“No, thank you.” Oliver declined, the picture of politeness, but there was an edge to his tone. Arnold must have told him that this “Curtis” was a fake. He probably also knew that Rische had noticed but hadn’t informed Arnold about it.

“Let’s cut to the chase, then,” Raul said after sipping his tea.

Rische took a sip as well, enjoying the bitter flavor she hadn’t tasted in quite some time. She replaced the cup on the saucer and met Raul’s eyes. “Thank you for stationing Siguelian knights around Lady Harriet’s room.”

“Well, first you tell me, ‘I want to talk, so make some time,’ and then you say, ‘Shut Harriet in her room and increase her guard.’ It’s easy enough to convince the girl herself to stay in, but it took some work to get that head maid of hers and the Fabrannian knights to agree.”

Rische appreciated that for a moment before she said, “I’d like to cooperate with you on what you came here to do.”

“What I came here to do, you say?” Raul smirked and leaned back in his chair. “As you can see, I came here in Curtis’s place. He’s not well at this moment, but our crown prince can’t very well sit out the wedding of Galkhein’s crown prince, can he?”

“That’s a lie. I seriously doubt you’re here on orders from Siguel’s royal family.”

Maybe it was just that he hadn’t been granted permission, but Rische knew Raul’s thought process. If he knew he wouldn’t obtain permission from the royal family, then he wouldn’t even ask. He would just sneak out of the country and make a move on his own.

“If you were here impersonating Prince Curtis for the royal family, then you would have committed to the disguise. You wouldn’t have shown yourself to me without the disguise or given me your real name, right?”

“You seem to have a high opinion of me.”

Of course I do.

Her time beside him as a hunter had taught her just how brilliant Raul was at disguising himself. If he was serious about impersonating Curtis, then he wouldn't do anything the real Curtis wouldn't do, even by mistake.

"What could I do, though? The moment I stood in front of you as Curtis, I knew you'd seen right through me. There was no hiding it then."

"That's a lie as well. I gave no indication that I knew you were a fake, but you didn't make use of my silence. Instead, you came to see me of your own volition, which just doesn't make sense to me." Rishe had been wondering about his motivation all this time, and she'd finally figured it out. "If you were acting on orders from the royal family, then you wouldn't do anything that could offend Prince Arnold. From what I hear of Prince Curtis from Lady Harriet, I can't imagine him being the type to do so. So I wondered why you kept approaching me as if you were trying to make advances on me."

He chuckled. "That's 'cause you're so cute."

"Another lie." Rishe returned Raul's amused look with a weary one. "You're here to save Lady Harriet from Fabrannia, aren't you?"

Raul gave her some slow blinks.

"Lady Harriet's contact with men is strictly limited. They aren't even allowed to act as her guards. Even if you disguised yourself as a woman, you still wouldn't be able to get past her Fabrannian knights."

Rishe had proved that herself yesterday. She'd gotten in trouble for meeting with Harriet when her guards weren't present, and they'd all been irked with her when she left.

"If you wanted the chance to be alone with Lady Harriet, it makes the most sense to disguise yourself as Prince Curtis, a close family member."

"I see. So that's what you're thinking. You figure I didn't put in the effort to perfect my disguise for you and Arnold Hein because it was Fabrannia that I was trying to deceive."

"No. If we didn't realize you were a fake, you would have revealed your deception yourself when everything was over, right?" she asked, and Raul looked surprised. "What you're doing is too dangerous."

If Prince Curtis helped Lady Harriet escape, it would be taken as a betrayal of Fabrannia on Siguel's part. If you were doing this for the royal family, you would have to guarantee that someone would reveal you weren't the true Prince Curtis."

He hadn't exposed himself to Rishe on a whim or to make advances on her. It was so that she would be able to provide evidence that he wasn't the real Curtis. The reason he didn't cover his eyes with his bangs like Harriet did was because the difference in color was *evidence*.

Raul grinned, nonchalant as always. "Why would I save Harriet in the first place? Because the king of Fabrannia ignores her and she's not treated well? Such things are commonplace. No bride is going to be happy in a political marriage, and Harriet knows that too." He narrowed his eyes and said cynically, "There's no need to save her."

"If it were just that things aren't going well between her and her fiancé, that might be true," came Rishe's deliberate reply.

"Oh?"

"Last night, I lent Lady Harriet one of my purses, and when it was returned to me, this was inside it." Rishe loosened the strings of the burlap sack so that Raul could see the contents and placed it on the table. "I determined that Lady Harriet is the only one who could have put it there."

Raul studied it without a change in expression. "I see. Harriet's trying to paint you as a thief, then?"

"Of course not. These are nowhere near valuable enough for that accusation to stick." Rishe reached out and retrieved a coin from the bag. The coin shined like a mirror, not a single mark or scrape from actual circulation anywhere on it.

"I heard from Lady Harriet's head maid that His Majesty the king gave her plenty of Galkhein currency and told her to spend to her heart's content in Galkhein."

On that fact alone, the king wanted his fiancée to spend as lavishly as her heart desired, but that wasn't quite accurate.

"These coins would have been circulating in Fabrannia instead of Galkhein then, right?"

"Nothing strange about that. There are currency exchange shops

in this town that deal in foreign coins, right? If people from Galkhein travel and trade in Fabrannia, then they'll use Galkhein currency over —" Raul stopped short, and Rishe nodded.

"You've noticed? If they were collected in Fabrannia after circulating there, I would have no suspicions...but these coins are very clean. Freshly minted currency is rare even in its country of origin. And these look brand new." She held out the coin to Raul. "Why do you suppose coins from Fabrannia all look pristine, without any signs of changing hands?"

"That's a mean-spirited question to ask," Raul said, taking the coin and holding it up to his eye. "You realized ages ago that it's counterfeit money produced in Fabrannia."

As she'd expected, Raul had picked up on it as well. The coins being too new wasn't proof that they were fake, but their existence was suspicious when Rishe considered the data she'd had Arnold gather from the currency exchanges. She had requested the information wondering if she could track Galkhein's business dealings with foreign countries through data on currency exchanges. There were no records over the last few years of Galkhein gold coins being exchanged for the more valuable Fabrannian gold coins in the data.

It was strange for someone from a country without a significant trade agreement with Galkhein to have a burlap sack filled with Galkhein gold coins when there were no records of exchanges occurring in the closest port town. If there were any doubts as to the coins' authenticity, it would be simple to have them appraised to determine if they were genuine or not. Rishe had done several such appraisals herself in her first loop, and she was certain that these coins were cheap fakes that did not contain the legal gold content that would mark them as genuine.

"I'm sure Fabrannia's government is involved in the production of these coins. I can't imagine that Lady Harriet had them produced herself." Harriet wasn't even allowed to read books at her leisure. Someone who was denied even a simple freedom like that would never be able to arrange for the creation of counterfeit money on her own.

Raul crossed his legs and cupped his chin. "How mysterious. What reason could Fabrannia have to create Galkhein currency?"

"Counterfeit money is always created with material that doesn't add up to the value of the currency itself. In other words, it allows you

to use cheap material to obtain expensive goods.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh. So Fabrannia wants to strike it rich in Galkhein, then.”

“There are a few different reasons why a country might create counterfeit versions of another country’s currency.” Rishe grimaced as she recalled what she knew of the future. “The circulation of counterfeit money harms that country’s economy.”

Counterfeit money always caused economic disruption. She’d witnessed it herself in the future. Fake money was discovered in several countries, which led to decreased trust in those currencies and the need to authenticate money for even the smallest transactions. That slowed the economies of the affected countries immediately. Fabrannia was one of the countries rife with counterfeiting, she recalled. But in all her previous lives, it was always attributed to Queen Harriet and her other alleged crimes.

It’s possible Lady Harriet really did buy up jewelry from other countries. Rishe clenched the skirt of her dress in her fists. *I wonder if that was because the king ordered her to do so. She wasn’t living lavishly, but obtaining valuable goods from foreign countries using counterfeit currency.*

At this very moment, she had been instructed by the king of Fabrannia to spend the counterfeit currency he’d given her while she was away in Galkhein.

Everything I heard about Lady Harriet in my past lives was about how she bought foreign goods, not domestic ones. If she just wanted jewelry and dresses, it would be easy enough to obtain them from inside Fabrannia.

But she hadn’t because she was spending counterfeit money to obtain foreign treasure.

All that counterfeit money was produced by the Fabrannian royal family to enrich Fabrannia... It’s all so shortsighted.

To protect Galkhein’s economy, Arnold was working on a way to prevent foreign countries from suffering from a shortage of gold and silver. He knew that if his own country was to prosper, their partner trading countries had to prosper as well. Fabrannia’s scheme, meanwhile, would inevitably lead to their own ruin.

Fabrannia’s economy will be in total collapse in four years. I’ve seen it.

The nation blamed it all on Queen Harriet, making her a scapegoat for their citizens' ire.

I bet they executed Lady Harriet in part to silence her. As the "heinous criminal" that she was, any testimony she could give about the counterfeit money would be dismissed.

Rishe's heart ached for the Harriet in all her previous lives.

While their people starved, the Fabrannian royal family hoarded wealth. That's how they were able to manipulate Siguel into fighting against Galkhein for them.

It was all too clear to Rishe that the Fabrannian royal family was more interested in winning the war against Galkhein than feeding their starving people.

"Even when merchants were summoned here to the castle, Lady Harriet was terrified of interacting with them. But I don't think she feared being scolded by her head maid or purchasing expensive goods—I'm guessing she was afraid of using the counterfeit money her fiancé had ordered her to spend."

Now that Rishe thought about it this way, the little "mistake" Harriet had made yesterday started to make sense. "When we went out into town to shop, Lady Harriet said she'd forgotten her Galkhein currency in her room. It would have taken too much time to go back and get it, so she ended up exchanging the Fabrannian currency she had on hand for Galkhein coins."

"Hmm..."

"I would posit that she didn't forget the money. She made a decision, a spontaneous one, not to use the counterfeit currency even though she would have been reprimanded for it."

Harriet had volunteered to get herself ready before their shopping trip instead of relying on her maids to prepare her things. Her head maid had been exasperated over her forgetting the coins, but it seemed to Rishe that she'd done so deliberately.

"I don't think Lady Harriet was trying to implicate me in a crime." She looked into Raul's eyes and said, "Instead, I believe that she's trying to confess. To what Fabrannia—and she herself—is attempting to do."

She must have decided to come clean last night, but the Fabrannian knights had intruded on their conversation, therefore

impeding her confession to Rishe.

“The Fabrannian knights told Lady Harriet that she was to have her guards at her side when she was with someone other than her brother or her maids. That’s why Lady Harriet must have thought this was her last opportunity to tell me and hid the sack in my purse.”

The reason Fabrannia wanted to keep other people away from Harriet as much as possible was because they feared her confessing their secrets.

“Oliver. The king of Fabrannia pursued a marriage to one of Prince Arnold’s sisters, but it didn’t work out. Do I have that right?”

“Yes. They’ve pursued friendly relations with Galkhein several times since, but His Majesty doesn’t seem interested.”

In the future, Fabrannia used Harriet’s “crimes” as a pretext to cow Siguel into fighting for them in their war with Galkhein. It seemed that their own profit wasn’t their only motive for their actions; they held a grudge against Galkhein too. Perhaps the king resented Galkhein for refusing his marriage to one of their princesses.

The relationship between Galkhein and Fabrannia wasn’t very friendly in all my past lives either. There was very little trade between them, so there wouldn’t have been much circulation of Fabrannia’s counterfeit currency in Galkhein.

This time around, Harriet was visiting Galkhein as Siguel’s princess.

“Would you say that Galkhein’s being the closest powerful country to Fabrannia factors into the latter’s desire for a close relationship?” she asked Oliver, who nodded in response.

“If the matter of the counterfeit money is true, then their aim is to obtain wealth from Galkhein and weaken our economy at the same time. If they were able to trade with us, they would stand to profit even more from their counterfeiting.”

The design of Galkhein’s current coinage didn’t require too much skill to imitate. There had been several incidents of counterfeiting already. But *this* was a crime on an international level, committed by a foreign power.

“You noticed the counterfeit money, didn’t you, Raul?” Rishe locked on to his red eyes. “If Lady Harriet was implicated in the crimes

of her fiancé's family, she wouldn't be the only one who'd suffer. Eventually, Siguel would get caught up in it as well, leading to a disaster for the whole nation."

Yet again, this was something Rishe had seen for herself in each of her past lives. After Harriet's execution, Fabrannia used twisted logic to demand reparations from Siguel. Having no noteworthy assets other than their books, and having always relied on their allies for protection, Siguel had no choice but to give in to their demands. Since they had no wealth with which to pay monetary reparations, they were instead forced to participate in a reckless war.

Many people died in that war. Raul himself likely hadn't escaped unscathed. Rishe didn't know what became of Siguel in the end, since she herself had been a casualty.

"Isn't that why you made up your mind to save Lady Harriet? With or without orders from the royal family?"

Ever since Harriet left for Fabrannia to prepare for her wedding, she hadn't been allowed to return home once. The only reason she was in this country was to celebrate Rishe and Arnold's wedding. If not for this chance, Harriet would have no opportunities to see her brother or Raul, so it had been impossible to save her in every one of Rishe's previous lives.

"Fabrannia merely permitted Lady Harriet to leave because she had to attend my wedding. And since she was here, they seized the opportunity to have her circulate some counterfeit currency."

Harriet's presence here was a unique opportunity for Fabrannia. The same went for Raul.

Without this wedding...if Prince Arnold and I weren't getting married, Raul wouldn't have been able to get close to Lady Harriet. Out of all my lives, the seventh is the first one where there's a chance to save her.

When she thought about it, it made sense that Raul would go so far as to disguise himself as Curtis to not waste this opportunity.

"Good grief." Raul uncrossed his legs and tilted forward, hiding his face. "I can't believe this. To think Harriet of all people would reveal the counterfeit currency to you..."

"Look, Raul. It might still be difficult to get Prince Arnold's help at this point."

Rishe knew that Arnold was kind, but he was also incredibly pragmatic and always cautious of his father. As with Coyolles, he wouldn't give his assistance to another country without gaining something in return.

"But if there's anything that *I* can help with, I'd like to do so."

Raul took a deep breath. Then his shoulders began to tremble. Before Rishe could determine what that meant, he threw back his head and burst out laughing.

After his amused outburst, he looked at Rishe and smiled. "Just kidding!" He stuck his tongue out, and his smile turned to a smirk. "Oh man, you had me sweating! I mean, you were being so sweet to that silly little princess. I was worried she might get attached to you and spill the whole thing." Raul propped his elbow on his knee and his chin in his hand, examining Rishe. "Like you said, I knew about the counterfeit money. Not only that, but I knew what King Walter ordered Harriet's knights to do too."

Siguel ordered the hunters to investigate Fabrannia, then. I thought they might have.

She didn't hear anything about the counterfeit money in her fifth life, though. Now she wondered if Raul had even reported what he'd learned to Siguel's royal family.

"Obviously, those knights were ordered to keep anyone from getting too close to Harriet. Her brother, Curtis, was only allowed to be around her because there was nothing he could do even if he found out about the counterfeit money. With Fabrannia holding their princess hostage, Siguel would be forced to keep quiet."

"So you didn't report the counterfeit money to them because you knew there was nothing they could do?"

"Maybe...but they've got some other funny little orders too." Raul held up two fingers next to his face. "First, they must watch Harriet to make sure she spends the counterfeit money like she's supposed to. Even if she pretended to forget it in her room, I doubt they would have let that happen again. Then there's one more thing..."

There was a sharp glint in his red eyes. "If anyone finds out about the money...then they're supposed to kill Harriet."

Rishe and Oliver gasped.

“Why would they kill Lady Harriet?!”

“Well, there’s the obvious reason of keeping her quiet. I’m sure you can guess the other reason, seeing as how you stepped up to protect her yourself.”

Frowning, Rishe voiced her theory: “If Lady Harriet is killed in Galkhein, Galkhein must bear some responsibility.”

“Exactly! Poor King Walter would definitely blame Galkhein in his grief over losing his beloved fiancée. He could demand a vast sum of money as compensation, or perhaps a replacement bride.”

“What shallow plotting,” Oliver muttered beside Rishe. His voice was as gentle as ever, yet it contained a chill.

Raul laughed heartily. “No matter what I say, it’s all just the prattle of a Curtis impostor. No one would believe the Fabrannian royal family was trying to execute such a ludicrous plan.”

“Raul, you’re—” Rishe stopped short and immediately put a hand to her mouth.

“Lady Rishe? What’s the matter?” Oliver asked anxiously.

Rishe didn’t respond, instead squeezing her eyes shut and keeping her hand pressed to her lips.

“Oh? Is the drug starting to take effect?”

“You bastard...what did you do to Lady Rishe?” The hostility radiating from Oliver was so intense, it could’ve seared Rishe’s cheek.

“Oliver!” Rishe reached out and gripped Oliver’s jacket. She felt him start at her touch.

“You’ll lose consciousness soon,” Raul said. “Right around now, I bet your limbs are going numb and it’s getting harder for you to speak.”

“Raul...you...”

“At this time, I’d say the Fabrannian knights and Siguelian knights...my subordinates, in other words...are taking Harriet outside the castle.”

Rishe shot Raul an icy glare, and he shrugged.

“You thought I was trying to save Harriet? You think too much of me. My actual plan was to give Harriet’s head to Fabrannia as a little present and then switch sides.”

“Ngh...”

“You wanted Siguel’s knights to protect Harriet from Fabrannia’s while we were chatting, right? Well, sorry to say I’ve already betrayed Siguel. I’m actually in cahoots with Fabrannia.” Raul stood and stretched.

Unable to get up, Rishe chased after him with her words. Through shallow breaths, she said, “I knew it... The ‘ghost’ my maids saw was...”

“One of my men, yes. If a suspicious person was spotted inside the castle, security would be redirected here, right? Thanks to that, Vinrhys is empty of Galkhein knights.”

Rishe doubled over, and Raul heaved a sigh.

“You really don’t look good. Well, this should keep Arnold Hein busy for now.”

“Hold it. Do you really think I’ll just let you leave?”

“Try and stop me, then!”

Oliver was blocking the door, but that wasn’t where Raul was headed. He went straight for the window, opened it, and put a foot up on the sill.

“It was fun, Miss. If we ever end up meeting again, I hope you’ll show me that cute smile of yours.”

“Raul!”

“See you. Bye-bye!” With that, Raul jumped down from the third-story window.

“Damn it!” Oliver clicked his tongue in frustration and knelt beside Rishe. “Lady Rishe! Lady Rishe, are you all right?!”

“Yes, I’m fine!” Rishe chirped, straightening up in an instant. “Thank you for playing along with my little performance. As we discussed beforehand, we’ll let him escape for now and follow him later.”

“But, Lady Rishe...” Oliver was dismayed, staring at Rishe in disbelief. “Are you sure you’re all right? It sounded like he dosed you with something.”

“Yes. I anticipated that, so I took an antidote beforehand.” Rishe beamed and stood, performing a curtsy with a flourish of her skirt. She hoped the gesture proved that she was perfectly fine.

I know the very tactics Raul likes to use in these situations.

It wasn't just his methods—she knew the exact drug and dosage he would use as well. That was why she was able to predict the precise trap he'd lay for her and how she knew when to act like the drug was taking effect to make it believable.

I learned better than anyone else how Raul "hunts" during the five years I spent with him in my fifth life.

Rishe told the dumbfounded Oliver, "Since I managed to fool him, Raul thinks he's immobilized me for the time being...and he seems to think the same of Prince Arnold." She'd drunk the spiked tea on purpose to take advantage of Raul's resulting confidence.

Taking out a map of Vinrhys from a small purse, Rishe studied the layout of the port city. "I left the placement of the knights to you. Do you mind telling me where you stationed them?"

"Er, of course... I've spread out the forces concentrated inside the castle for the last few days. If they see anything suspicious, they should raise smoke signals to let us know. I'll mark their locations."

"Impressive. With so many in these spots, we should have the whole town covered."

Their forces weren't as concentrated inside the castle as Raul expected. This was all thanks to Oliver mobilizing the knights in Arnold's place.

"Thank you for trusting me, Oliver." Rishe inclined her head deeply, surprising the attendant all over again.

"You confirmed that Lady Harriet was already missing before speaking to this 'Raul' fellow, right?"

It was just as Oliver said. The truth was that Rishe had gone to investigate Harriet's room as soon as she found out about the counterfeit money. She knew someone would spot her coming from the hallway, so she'd descended the outer wall of the castle from the fourth floor with a rope and made sure that Harriet wasn't in her third-floor room. Then her goal changed from protecting Harriet to rescuing her—but to find out where she was, she had to let Raul escape.

Oliver, who had assisted her with all this, asked her, "Did you ask him to increase her guard detail to make him think you hadn't caught on to her abduction yet? To lull him into a false sense of security?"

“It was just to make things a little easier. It’s more convenient for us if his men are guarding an empty room rather than following us,” Rishe said with a grin.

“You truly are...”

“Yes? I’m what?” Rishe blinked, waiting, and Oliver smiled softly.

“Nothing. I’m just looking forward to your marriage to my lord more and more.”

“Huh?!” Rishe had no idea how that thought connected to anything they’d said up until this point. The comment flustered her, but she quickly feigned composure. Much as she wanted to ask Oliver what he meant, following Raul was her first priority. She knew he was headed for wherever Harriet was.

“I don’t suppose you could keep this from Prince Arnold for a while longer?”

Oliver hesitated. “I really should report this to him right away...”

“I know, but it will be easier to rebuff any unreasonable demands from Fabrannia if Prince Arnold had no idea of Lady Harriet’s abduction at the time.”

Even if Fabrannia did demand some sort of recompense for Harriet’s abduction, Galkhein probably wouldn’t provide it. Nevertheless, Rishe figured it was best to stack the deck in their favor. Fabrannia’s plan to circulate counterfeit money and their motivation for killing Harriet were clear indications of hostility toward Galkhein.

“If I don’t tell His Highness anything, then Galkhein can simply cut ties with me if they’re put in a disadvantageous position, thereby absolving themselves of any responsibility in the matter,” she told Oliver, knowing he would understand.

He held her gaze for a moment, then bowed. “Let me summon some transportation before the knights determine his location.”

“Thank you!”

And with that, Oliver left the room. He would execute her plan swiftly. Feeling grateful, Rishe also apologized to Arnold in her heart.

I’m sorry for doing all this without telling you, and for borrowing your precious attendant.

Rishe sighed and surveyed the room. Raul had been staying here,

and she knew how his mind worked. Her eyes landed on the fireplace, which wouldn't have been in use in the summertime, and she peered up into the chimney from below.

Aha! I knew it.

Unsurprisingly, she found a hidden bow with its string removed. She wiped off the dusting of soot, bent the bow, and restrung it. There was a full quiver hidden in the same place.

Having obtained a weapon, Rishe returned to her fourth-floor room and opened the trunk. She pulled out a cloak and tugged it over her dress. Then she picked up the black sword leaning against her bed—the same one she'd borrowed from Arnold two days before. He'd used it up until a few years ago and kept it on hand as a spare after switching to his current sword, she'd heard. Since it was made to be wielded by someone with a man's build, it was heavy for Rishe. Regardless, she equipped the belt she'd also worn two days ago and affixed both the sword and quiver to it. The bow was the only thing she couldn't hide under her cloak, so she carried it in her hand as she headed out into the hallway.

Oliver finished his preparations at the exact same time. She heard his voice from down the hall. "We have smoke signals. I readied a fast horse for you, so please come this way."

All the knights on security duty at the castle gawked at Rishe as she passed with the bow in hand. Unbothered by their stares, she joined Oliver, and the two of them headed for a back entrance rather than the front.

"Look to the eastern sky. There's blue smoke rising from a district on the outskirts of the town."

"Thank you. I didn't think we'd find them so quickly." Rishe glanced up at the blue sky as she ran for the stables. Oliver's - instructions had been precise, and the knights must have done well covering ground in the city to find their target in such a short time.

Still, apprehension pricked at Rishe like needles. *This is too easy. Raul's true objective must be—*

"Lady Rishe, you'll find your horse in the rightmost stable!"

"What?! But isn't that where the royal—" Rishe looked to the rightmost stable and froze. Standing there were a dazzling palomino

horse and a man holding its reins.

“P-Prince Arnold!”

Sheer exasperation crossed Arnold’s beautiful face. After a pause, he asked, “What in the world are you doing?”

“What are *you* doing here, Your Highness?”

She’d asked Oliver to keep quiet about this. She whirled in his direction, but the silver-haired attendant just smiled at her. Rishe understood everything then. Oliver had never actually replied in the affirmative after she’d asked him to refrain from telling Arnold. Oliver hadn’t been doing what she asked at all. He’d been following his lord’s orders from the beginning.

It was foolish of me to apologize for borrowing his attendant!

“The lecture can wait. Get on. We’re following him, right?”

“If I accept your help, this will become an international incident.”

“How am I to turn a blind eye to this now that my wife’s - involved?” Arnold retorted, as if it were the natural outcome.

“Ugh...”

The prince knew just what was going on, so there was no point in wasting time arguing. Rishe gave up and used a step stool to boost herself onto the horse’s ornate saddle. Arnold took his place behind her and grasped the reins. Rishe ended up quite close to him, practically locked in his embrace. She tried not to think about that as she gripped the saddle.

Tightening his hold on the reins, Arnold shot a look at his attendant. “Oliver.”

“Yes. Be careful... You too, Lady Rishe.”

Rishe turned to thank Oliver, but before she could speak, Arnold spurred the horse onward. From the interaction, it was clear to Rishe that the horse was clever and well trained. It changed gait smoothly, careful not to burden its riders with its movements.

As they sped away from the castle, descending a green hill toward the town, Rishe muttered, “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to protect Lady Harriet...”

If only Rishe had realized the burden Harriet was carrying the night before. They could have avoided the danger she was in now, as

well as the possibility of Galkhein being held accountable for her fate.

I'm sure Lady Harriet is terrified.

Even if they managed to rescue her before she was harmed at all, Rishe had failed as soon as she was abducted in the first place.

As Rishe hung her head, Arnold spoke up. "You're not a Siguelian knight tasked with protecting the princess." The words sounded cold, but she knew he didn't mean them that way. Arnold's tone was admonishing as he asked her, "What's your position in this country?"

"Fiancée of the prince of Galkhein."

"That's right. And in about a month, it'll be 'the crown princess of Galkhein.'" His large hands held the reins in such a way so as not to bother the horse. "Is taking up a sword and protecting the princess from danger all you can do?"

Rishe was stunned. If she were Harriet's knight, then protecting her *would* be all she could do. But she wasn't. Just like Arnold said, she could be of help to Harriet with resources other than a sword. When she realized what he was trying to say, she twisted around to meet Arnold's blue eyes. "No..."

"As long as you understand that."

With a nod, Rishe pulled her hood over her head. They had to pass through the busy port town before reaching the location of the smoke signals. Her coral hair would stand out there, so she kept it hidden under her cloak and tied a ribbon under her chin to keep the wind from blowing it off.

She had other concerns over their journey as well. "Prince Arnold, there's a chance they've set traps along the way to prevent us from following them."

"We'll avoid the shortest route, then. Do you know what weapons they'll be wielding?"

"They'll be archers, I imagine. And they may have paralyzing poisons on their arrows," Rishe said, adding that she'd found a bow and arrows in Raul's room.

"Prince Curtis's impostor gifted me several pieces of information. There's his alias of Raul, for one, plus the fact that he has several subordinates here."

There was very little Rishe had learned from Raul in this life, but she figured if she told Arnold this, he'd be less suspicious about how she knew what she did. That was why she'd said Raul's name in front of him the day before.

"I heard you sent the knights out into the town without their jackets on. Was that so that archers wouldn't target them?"

"Yes. I'm sure they've been watching *us* since we left the castle, however."

She was sure that Raul had his hunters watching them through monoculars. As soon as they entered the hunters' range, arrows would start flying at them.

Arnold wasn't worried, though. "If they shoot at us, I can just cut the arrows down."

He speaks about such an incredible feat like it's nothing!

Rishe was intimately familiar with this skill of Arnold's, though. In the war in the future and in the incident at the Grand Basilica, Arnold had struck down every arrow that had flown at him.

Soon enough, the port town of Vinrhys was right before their eyes. The moment Arnold slowed the horse to duck into an alleyway, he and Rishe reacted simultaneously.

"Your Highness!"

"I know."

Arnold transferred the reins to one hand and drew his sword with the other. With a dry *snap*, an arrow split in two in midair. A moment later, another flew at them, and Arnold smacked it away. His sword swished exactly where it needed to without a single wasted motion.

I can't believe him!

Rishe noticed something else in those few seconds. Arnold was swinging his sword to protect her. Not just from the arrows but in a way that would prevent her from falling off the horse.

Prince Arnold's defense is perfect, but the hunters are no slouches themselves. At this rate, they'll get the both of us while I'm weighing him down.

She steadied her nerves with a breath and spoke to Arnold over her shoulder as she retrieved her bow. "Your Highness, could you hold

me close with your rein arm?”

“Huh?”

Arnold frowned, but ignoring his confusion, Rishe bent down and whispered into the ear of the beautiful palomino horse, “I’m sorry. I’m going to be riding you a little strangely, but I’ll try not to get in your way. So just be a little patient, all right?”

“Hey, Rishe, what are you...?”

Rishe put one hand on the saddle and then lifted a knee up onto it. This was an unnatural position, of course, so she started leaning to one side immediately. Arnold wrapped an arm around her and pulled Rishe close to him.

“What are you doing?!”

“Closer, Your Highness.” Rishe got up on her knees on the saddle, turned to face Arnold, and nocked an arrow to her bow. “Hold me tight. Press my body to yours.”

Arnold sighed deeply when he caught on to what Rishe was trying to do and clutched her body against his. Pressed up snug against Arnold, Rishe’s torso was stabilized atop the horse. Rishe took aim at the rooftop that the arrows had come from.

“Please maintain a steady pace for me.”

“I know.”

As long as she knew which way the arrows were coming from, it was easy enough to tell where a hunter was hidden. She sensed their enmity rising as she closed one eye, held her breath, and pulled the bowstring taut. A moment later, Rishe aimed for the rooftop and let her arrow fly.

“Gah!” There was a short scream, and then all was silent. Arnold must have noticed the hunter’s bloodlust disappearing as well.

“You hit.”

“Arrows aren’t that lethal, so I doubt they’re dead.”

The hunters all wore armor over their vital points, and these arrowheads weren’t large enough to pierce leather. Her target must have gone quiet due to the paralyzing agent on the arrowhead.

“I’ll take care of the archers. Your Highness, you—” She cut herself off, sensing a distant hostile presence over her shoulder. Arnold

swung his sword at the same moment. The blade flashed before Rishe's eyes, batting away an arrow whizzing toward them. The arrow, presumably aimed at Rishe, clattered to the cobblestones.

"You don't need to worry about the arrows. Concentrate on your task."

"Thank you!"

Even on horseback, with one arm holding Rishe to him, there were no flaws in Arnold's swordsmanship. He must have had plenty of experience with mounted combat. Not only was his handling of the reins expert, but his horse also seemed to understand his every need. Rishe nocked another arrow, entrusting herself to the stability of Arnold's arm.

They charged through the port town of Vinrhys, Arnold with his sword in hand and Rishe with her bow.

"Another archer down on the west side. Next, I'll take out the two to the east!"

"Got it. We'll be entering an alleyway in another three minutes and ten seconds. I'll lower our speed two minutes from now."

"Be careful of the sea after exiting the alley. They'll surely attack when the water's reflection is sure to blind!"

Throwing reports and instructions to one another, they each focused on their individual tasks. Arnold knocked away arrows, and Rishe shot down enemies as they approached the smoke signals.

"Your Highness, can you get around to the right of that building?"

"Not a problem," he replied. "Above."

"Leave it to me. Try to maintain this speed!"

Arnold did as Rishe asked just as she wielded her bow as Arnold expected.

This is amazing! It's like we can read each other's minds! Rishe thought as she regarded him during a lull in the fighting. Arnold felt her gaze and met it.

Arm still circling her torso, he grinned roguishly at her and asked in a challenging tone, "What do you want to do next?"

Rishe squeaked as a rush raced up her spine. She felt like she could do anything if Arnold fought at her side. Shaking off the sensation

—which was dangerous to have on the battlefield—Rishe moderated her tone and told him, “We’re almost to the church. The signals came from there. However, the shortest route is still dangerous. If you could find a route with good visibility, even if it’s a bit of a detour, that would be ideal.”

“Got it. I’m sure they’re guarding the door either way, though.”

She had to agree there. It would take too long to breach the church from the front. “That’s why I plan to take a different route inside once we’ve arrived.”

“A different route?” Arnold repeated doubtfully, but Rishe just concentrated on her archery.

We must save Lady Harriet. And if I’m right about what Raul’s planning...

Chapter 5

THE SMALL, ABANDONED CHURCH had all but vanished from people's memories as soon as a larger one was built in the center of town. Its goddess statue had been removed, and there was a thin layer of dust over the pews in the empty hall.

Raul perched on the back of one pew, his elbow on his knee and his chin in his hand. Fabrannia's lady knights did their work on their own, their backs to him. Raul watched them, ridiculing them languidly.

"Took you long enough to get together, don't you think?"

The knights glared at him just like he expected. "Be quiet. Unlike you, we must follow His Majesty's orders."

"So tense! Guess that's no surprise, though." Raul smiled and peeked behind him. "You must do a good job killing Harriet or you won't be able to pin the crime on Galkhein, will you?"

Harriet sat on the platform where the lectern was, her hands bound behind her back and her head hanging powerlessly.

"How insolent. Don't forget that we only included you in our plans because you bowed your head to us and begged."

"Oh yeah? You didn't even realize I was a fake. It's a good thing I'm on Fabrannia's side, 'cause if I were here to save Harriet, yeesh..."

"I believe I told you to be quiet."

Apparently, they were painfully aware that they'd failed to recognize Raul's Curtis for a fake.

Raul laughed and looked around the abandoned church. "Well, whatever. Hurry up and get the rest of your knights down here." There were just twenty of the Fabrannian knights present in the church. There should have been about ten still on their way. Raul cracked his neck and said jokingly, "I picked a little fight with the crown prince of Galkhein, after all. I'll need the group of you to protect me until I can make my escape to Fabrannia!"

"Hmph. Just like a hunter to be a damn coward."

"That's a little out of line, don't you think? Was I not integral to

your abduction scheme?”

He knew not to take his harassment *too* far. Under their hateful gazes, Raul got down from the pew and ambled over to Harriet. He knelt in front of her. “Harriet. Are you crying?”

“Raul...why are you doing this?” Harriet looked up at him, trembling, and Raul was surprised to see that, while she *was* scared, she wasn’t crying.

Well, I’ll be. I thought for sure she’d be white as a sheet and bawling her eyes out.

He made sure his expression was cold and didn’t betray his surprise. “That’s my line. Why did you betray Fabrannia? Giving the coins King Walter entrusted you with to that girl... You thought she’d see just what they were and help you?” Even Raul had been surprised by that move. “What a bad girl you are. And you’re supposed to be a princess! You knew that if you did that, Fabrannia wouldn’t protect Siguel any longer and the whole country would be in danger, didn’t you?”

“Ugh...”

“I mean, all Siguel has going for it is its bookmaking. It needs help from its allies, which are headed by Fabrannia. So if Fabrannia turns on it, it’ll be all over for poor Siguel...and we ‘hunters’ are just a mercenary band. We’re not knights who’ve sworn fealty to you or anything.”

Fabrannia’s lady knights shot Harriet scornful looks. They were mere knights, yet they had not a shred of respect for Harriet, who was royalty. Fabrannia’s low opinion of Siguel was obvious with a single glance.

Harriet had lost weight since the last time Raul had seen her—when she departed for Fabrannia for her engagement—and she’d likely received all manner of ill treatment there. As he looked at her pale face, he said flatly, “I know you’re fainthearted, but it would’ve been easy to fool Galkhein. You should have just endured your guilt and done some shopping. That’s all it would have taken for you to become Fabrannia’s next queen.”

The princess held her breath, shaking her head left and right. “I...I won’t...” She spoke slowly, tripping over her words, and it sounded like she’d resigned herself to her fate. “I knew if I used the fake coins, I

would get what I wanted... His Majesty would praise me, think I was worth making use of... But that's not right." Her voice quivered with fear, but she pressed on. "It's all over as soon as one fake coin enters the marketplace. When that happens, every coin in circulation in that country can no longer be trusted. And when their money can't be trusted, their economy collapses..."

Raul studied the top of Harriet's head in silence.

"I...I didn't give the coins to Lady Rishe for her to help me. I'm not worthy of her help!" Determined yet clumsy, Harriet stammered, "Y-yet Lady Rishe said she considered me a friend!"

Raul could certainly imagine the girl saying that. She had the contradictory traits of being a good judge of character and not knowing how to doubt people. He'd just met Rishe a few days ago, yet he was sure that he'd come to that same conclusion after a longer period of observation.

"Galkhein needs to know about Fabrannia... It's not just Galkhein's currency that Fabrannia is trying to make. There are many others too..."

I know. Raul was more or less aware of Fabrannia's plot.

"If you'd just done what you were told, Fabrannia would've profited off of the counterfeit money, and Siguel would've benefited."

"Any wealth obtained through another country's suffering won't last long! I've read so in plenty of books. It's the people who shoulder that burden... So, to prevent Galkhein from suffering...to protect its innocent people...I can't obey Fabrannia."

The Fabrannian knights glared even harder at Harriet. She flinched, but she kept staring straight up at Raul.

"I know I can't live the way I wish because I was born a princess." Harriet summoned all her bravery to say, "But I will never do anything to make innocent citizens suffer, even under threat of death!"

Raul had expected Harriet to cower in fear. When had she become so determined? As soon as he thought the question, he could clearly picture in his mind the very person who had given Harriet confidence, allowed her to take back her pride, and set her facing forward rather than down.

"You stupid, senseless little princess." Raul sighed from the

bottom of his heart.

Trapped here, Harriet had no idea what had happened in the castle up on the hill. She didn't know that that girl named Rishe had seen through the counterfeiting scheme or that she wanted to save Harriet. And she didn't know that Raul had immobilized that girl with a drug.

Self-derision bubbling inside him, Raul sneered. "And look where that's gotten you. Fabrannia's knights found out about your treachery, and now they must kill you. Once they do, Fabrannia and the whole international community will blame Galkhein for your death."

There were bound to be countries who saw the plot for what it was, but the incident was sure to disgrace Galkhein regardless. They certainly wouldn't be able to hold a leisurely wedding after foreign royalty was killed on their soil. The crown prince's wedding would be postponed, and rumors would fly that Galkhein couldn't keep their foreign guests safe. As he pictured that future, Raul hazily remembered a scene from his past.

"You must learn to lie as naturally as you breathe."

Raul had heard this often when he was young.

"While you can, you must throw away your own hopes and wants. Do you understand me, Raul?" The white-haired old man speaking to him was the previous head of his hunting troop. "Your own heart will only get in your way. True sentiment will slow your feet. Perfect shadows bend lies to their will."

"Yeah. I got it, Gramps."

Raul had nodded, dutiful, because he *did* understand. After all, he'd lived on his own before the old man had taken him in.

Raul's earliest memory was staring at the dirty fingertips of his mother's corpse the night she'd died in an alley. To survive, he'd observed adults like his life depended on it. After all, there was no point in begging for food or money from those who wouldn't give it to him. So Raul stayed still and watched all the people as they passed him by, like a hawk. Did they have anything to spare? What would garner their sympathy? How should he act to gain their help? He studied every day, learning through trial and error, and learned a lot: what different

people wanted and desired, what sort of cajolery they would succumb to, and what they wouldn't be able to refuse.

Smile even if you're not happy. Break down crying even if you're not sad.

The young Raul had told himself those things time and time again.

If you keep lying, you'll at least have something to eat tomorrow.

That sort of lifestyle must have suited him. When he met the former chief one day, the man saw through his lies and even took him in, saying he'd raise Raul himself.

"Thank you. I'm glad you took a liking to me. I'll do my best to repay you," he'd said with a smile. In truth, he wasn't happy in the least.

If I keep lying and smiling, I'll be able to eat every day from now on, though.

Raul still remembered the relief he'd felt that day. If he deceived people and made them like him, he wouldn't starve. That was the important thing, so even after the previous chief took Raul in against his will, he trained under the man. When he was praised, he acted pleased, and when he was scolded, he acted remorseful. And since he'd spent so much time and effort observing adults, he got better and better at serving as a body double for those he was assigned to protect.

As he grew taller, he sometimes had doubts.

But...what was it that made me happy again?

Around the time Raul became unable to answer that question, he was assigned to guard a princess. It was for a short time, just a year or so. Raul was eleven then, and he recalled that the princess had just turned sixteen.

"Raul, what makes you happy?"

He found the princess's guileless smile bothersome.

A shadow doesn't need happiness.

"Also, what sort of things do you like? I'll have the chefs prepare anything you want to eat."

I don't need to like things either. If I figured out what I like, I'd figure out what I don't like too.

"I must go to another country soon for a political marriage. My time here feels so short." Sorrow played on her still-curved lips as she tucked her flowing blonde hair behind her ear. "I hope I get to see a real smile from you before then."

"What a sweet princess you are. Why would you want that from someone like me?" he asked with a smirk.

She ruffled Raul's hair. "Because I'd like to have at least a little happiness where I'm going to be living from now on."

"Hm?"

"I want to believe that my marriage will allow kids like you to be happy in this country." There was a slight shadow in her smile. "If I believe that, I'm sure I'll be at least a little bit happier over there."

Back then, Raul had had no idea why the princess would say something like that. It irked him to no end because that princess was the first person he couldn't understand even after all the time he spent observing her. That was also the reason he started to feel like he *wanted* to understand her. That desire was the first emotion he'd identified as his own in a long time. It felt true to him, unlike when he wanted to understand people to get them on his side or when he had to pretend to be someone else. It was for that reason that he so desperately observed the princess, all the while putting more and more effort into his training so that he wasn't removed from the position of her guard.

What does whether I smile or not have to do with her happiness? At the same time, he knew that he was in no position to even wish for her joy. Her future husband's the one who's going to make her happy. All I can do is protect her with my life.

Then, she went off to be married. The country she left for was a large one, and it was that country's emperor who had decided on marrying her. If she was to be wed to someone who desired her, then she was sure to be happy. Even if it was a political marriage, Raul believed that he'd be able to smile for her just like she wished. But he would soon learn that that belief was a naive one.

"It seems she took her own life."

News of her death came from the chief just a year later.

"I asked one of the hunters to investigate it. The country reported it as a death from illness, but that's a lie."

The hunters whispered among one another.

“Is it because of her stillborn child?”

“She was wasting away even before the birth. The lady must have been suffering for one reason or another...”

“The only reason this country wasn’t invaded was because she accepted that marriage and bore all the suffering herself.”

Apparently, the princess had been married as a hostage. It was nothing so fortunate as a marriage born out of desire. That was why she’d had such meager hopes, why she felt the need to feign courage in that foreign land.

“The poor thing... It must have been worse than death for her there in Galkhein,” the chief said, letting it slip.

Raul learned something right then and there: princesses who were pawns in political marriages would never be happy.

That princess’s family never even protested the fate that befell her. They said things like, “The emperor of Galkhein overlooked our country because we offered her up to him... We’re proud of her sacrifice.”

Apparently, royals lived for their country and at times had to die for them. To fulfill those duties, they smiled and accepted marriages they didn’t desire, and they weren’t allowed to weep over their misfortune.

Huh. They’re the same as us, then.

She had wished for him to show her a genuine smile, but all Raul ended up with was a new sense of determination. *You shouldn’t have any emotions for yourself. It’s much easier to smile and cry when the situation requires it.*

After that, Raul traveled to all sorts of countries with his foster family, the hunters. They were mercenaries for hire. They would go anywhere for money, serving whoever was currently paying them. It didn’t have to be a well-paying country because they could use the information they gained in smaller countries when larger countries hired them. In fact, the chief went after jobs in smaller countries for the benefit of Raul—his successor.

One of those countries was Siguel. There, Raul met Prince Curtis, who was fifteen—Raul’s age—and the ten-year-old Harriet. A mature

smile on his face, Curtis had reached out immediately for a handshake upon meeting Raul, who was nothing more than a disposable guard.

“It’s nice to meet you, Raul. This is my sister, Harriet. She’s rather timid, I’m afraid.”

The girl staring up at Raul from behind her brother seemed anything *but* timid. She had quite a ferocious glare, but Raul, who was used to observing people, could tell that it was fear and bashfulness behind her gaze.

So Raul smiled, putting on a bright, gentle expression that wouldn’t scare the fainthearted girl. “Hello. It’s a pleasure to be working for you, Prince Curtis, Princess Harriet.”

Thanks to that first impression, Harriet gradually came to trust Raul more and more. And as he smiled in front of the siblings, Raul thought to himself, *I’m sure this princess is going to have to endure a miserable political marriage one day too.*

On the siblings’ part, however, they tried to get closer to him without any ulterior motives.

“You’re amazing, Raul! You can walk without making any sound, and you’re a crack shot with a bow. Sometimes my parents can’t even tell when you’re disguised as me! Isn’t that right, Harriet?”

“Yeah!” Harriet nodded at Curtis’s words, her cheeks flushed.

These were all just skills he’d learned to stay alive, but Raul pretended he was happy to hear it. “I am honored you think so, Your Highnesses.”

“Hey, didn’t I say you don’t need to be so polite with us? We’re almost the same age, so I wish you’d treat us like we’re your friends.”

“Friends?” At times like these, Raul worried he might be making a strange face, but Curtis and Harriet just smiled, not commenting on it.

“That’s right. We’re friends, Raul.”

“Yeah! We love you, Raul.”

Raul was astounded by the two of them. There was no way royalty could be friends with someone who was whisked off the street and into a mercenary band. Still, what was required of him in the moment was to behave like a friend.

“Thanks. I’m happy you feel that way.”

Raul had only intended to lie like he always did, but for some reason, he felt something warm swelling in his chest when he said those words.

What is this? It made him restless and uncomfortable, but the sensation was familiar to him too. *Am I...happy?*

He couldn't have that. He didn't need it to survive. It would hinder his work.

Away with that. What would I do if I failed to protect these two because of how I'm feeling?

He had to do a better job protecting them.

But just as he resolved himself, Siguel began educating Harriet in earnest about the duties of a future queen, and she retreated into herself more and more. Concerned by Walter of Fabrannia's words, she grew out her hair to hide her face and stopped looking people in the eye when she talked to them. She was a timid person from the start, so when her mother's education turned harsh, she lost her sunny smile. Only when she read or talked about books did her face light up with joy.

Several years went by. Raul's adoptive father died, making him the new chief of the hunters. It was right around then that Fabrannia requested that Harriet move there, to spend the remaining time up until her marriage in their country. The invitation was ostensibly so she could learn the ways of Fabrannia, but it didn't sit right with Raul. He implored Curtis to allow him to accompany Harriet to Fabrannia as her guard. If it would cause problems for a man to guard her, he need only disguise himself as a woman. Yet Fabrannia allowed Harriet but a single maid to accompany her and denied her any guards to take with her.

"Raul, could you just make one trip there to see how Harriet's doing?" Curtis asked him some time after Harriet left. "Something's not right. It's been six months, and she hasn't so much as replied to one of my letters..."

Are you stupid? What are you even gonna do when you find out what's happening there?

There was nothing Curtis *could* do.

Siguel has no resources to compete against another country. If they don't rely on their allies, headed by Fabrannia, they have no way to protect

themselves from larger countries. And if they go against Fabrannia, this country's doomed.

Still, Raul patted Curtis on the shoulder to reassure him and smiled. "Leave it to me, Curtis. I'll go see what's up and help Harriet if she needs it."

"Thanks, Raul!"

Thus, Raul went to Fabrannia and learned of Harriet's fate—of the scorn, abuse, and ridicule she endured, and of the counterfeit money scheme she'd been swept up in. Her head maid seemed to be doing her best to protect the princess. By proactively scolding her for her faults, she created an atmosphere that made it difficult for other people to comment on them. But such petty tactics would amount to nothing.

"Oh, Raul! You're back! How was Harriet?" a haggard Curtis asked him upon his return to Siguel.

He smiled at Curtis. "She's busy, but she seemed happy. You really worry too much about your sister, don't you?"

"Really?!"

Raul thought that this was the most perfect smile he'd ever put on as he added, "Harriet will be happy. I'm sure of it. So don't blame yourself for sacrificing her."

From then on, Raul put everything he had into his preparations. He gathered intelligence, found evidence of the counterfeiting, and trained his subordinates. He advised Curtis to form a platoon of lady knights and get them ready to be dispatched as soon as an opportunity presented itself. The problem was, that opportunity never came.

They could infiltrate Fabrannia, but they couldn't get anywhere near Harriet. Because of the counterfeiting, not only was security in the castle ramped up, but the king was always hovering around Harriet as well. If she used the counterfeit money even once, it would all be over. And right when Raul was starting to panic, something unexpected occurred.

Galkhein's crown prince got engaged and sent invitations out to every other country.

As he expected, Fabrannia latched on to this opportunity. They permitted Harriet to leave the country, something they had never done before, and ordered her to use the counterfeit money. At that exact

moment, Curtis happened to be feeling unwell. Raul volunteered to go as his body double, but he headed to Fabrannia instead of Galkhein without telling Siguel's royal family. He snuck onto Fabrannia's ship and poisoned the drinks of the Fabrannian knights, intending to complete his mission after they arrived in Galkhein once Harriet was without her guards.

His plan's first complication occurred when that beautiful girl Rishe appeared. The coral-haired lady stood at Harriet's side with the imperiousness of a knight, even though the timid princess was supposed to be without any guards. Galkhein shouldn't have had any female knights, so Raul thought her to be some hastily prepared stand-in, but her technique left nothing to be desired. She conducted herself like nothing less than a first-rate knight.

Raul had leapt from roof to roof, watching them from places he was sure no one could spot him—yet the girl had looked straight up at him. She had soft, pink lips and a nose with an elegant bridge. He could tell even looking through his monocular how long her eyelashes were and how big and round her eyes were. And those strong-willed emerald eyes stared right back at Raul. His breath almost caught at their beauty.

The moment she entered the alley, he understood that she was inviting him down. But even though he knew, he found himself following her on reflex. Her swordsmanship was delicate and graceful. The next time he saw her, she introduced herself as the fiancée of Galkhein's crown prince.

Back in the present, Raul huffed a small sigh. *I can't believe she was the real thing, and she actually changed Harriet. How can she afford to care about other people when she's a hostage in a political marriage with Galkhein? I've never seen someone more doomed to despair.*

Raul had told her, *"I'm thinking about snatching you up if you don't want to marry the crown prince."* He'd said it like a joke, but he meant every word. No bride was ever happy in a political marriage. Harriet and the late princess he hadn't been able to protect had both been miserable. The family this Rishe girl was marrying into was the same one that princess had gone to.

And yet, Rishe had told him plainly, *"No matter what disasters may befall me from marrying him, I'm not going to let it make me unhappy."*

There had been no doubt in her words at all.

“I’m going to be his bride. I’ve already chosen how I’m going to live this life.”

Hearing that, Raul had known in his bones that the girl was dangerous. He almost thought that she’d seen through what he really feared and hoped for at that moment. It had been only a few days since they’d met, but she had acted like she’d been at his side for years. If Raul was forced to realize that his performative emotions were fake, and he came to know what was really in his heart, he wouldn’t be able to go on.

It’s too late now. Fear is just another thing I don’t need. Isn’t that right?

Raul slowly opened his eyes. The door to the church opened, and several more Fabrannian knights entered.

There’s a few outside now too. I’d say fourteen. Fifteen inside... All twenty-nine are here.

The lady knights all glanced at him appraisingly.

They suck at this. You’re not hiding your aggression at all!

Of course, maybe they never intended to hide it in the first place. Raul cracked his neck and looked down at Harriet bound before him.

“Thanks, Harriet,” he said quietly, and she flinched. “You were always trying so hard to read the people around you, which made you so timid... You realized what I was trying to do and played along, didn’t you?”

“R-Raul, you really—”

Raul turned his back to her. “Kinda hurts my pride as a hunter, though. Can’t believe you *and* that Rishe girl saw through me so easily.”

“What are you two whispering about?” one of the female knights asked, stepping toward Raul.

“Nothing. Just exchanging a final farewell, that’s all.”

“Raul! Y-you can’t!”

“I suppose there’s no harm in that. After all, you’re both going to die here.”

Raul shrugged, appalled by the knight’s clichéd threat. “How

terrible. Here I was all excited at the prospect of being hired by Fabrannia, only to find out that I was deceived! And now I'm going to be killed!"

"You can't be serious. You came here from the start to rescue Harriet, didn't you?"

"And what about you? You planned to kill the both of us from the start too." It was a ridiculous farce. Raul stretched, tired of keeping up the act.

"Awfully confident, aren't you? You think you can protect her and defeat almost thirty trained knights all by yourself?"

"You've got it all wrong. I'm not obsessed with 'battle' like you lot."

The knights exchanged confused glances, but he paid it no mind.

"And I'm not concerned with both of us surviving either."

"I see. So you'll leave her behind and get away on your own."

"Oh, and there's one more thing." Raul smiled and pointed straight up. "I'm not actually alone."

Right then, the knights went on full alert—but it was too late. In the time it took them to blink, five of Raul's men had descended from the ceiling to stand around him.

"Impossible! When could they have...?!"

"They were here from the start. Too bad you didn't even notice."

"Chief! We have Her Highness!"

Raul didn't turn around, but he could sense Harriet being picked up behind him. She must have been still tied and struggling; her voice was pained as she called out, "Wait! L-Let me go! Raul's going to...!"

"All right. Get going, guys. Follow the plan."

"Chief, are you really gonna—"

"I said go." He shooed them away, and they didn't protest again.

One of them must have covered Harriet's mouth, because her shouting was muffled. His men climbed back up the ropes they'd come down on.

No point putting up a fight. All we wanted was to get Harriet out of here.

Raul licked his lips, cocking his head and smiling blithely. The knights must not have liked that.

“They’re going up! Don’t let them! Grab the ropes and pull them —”

“Ah-ah-ah.” He threw a knife at one of the knights when she went for a rope. The moment she faltered, he leaped forward, closing the gap between them. He plunged his knee into her gut and used the momentum to spin and smack his heel into another one.

“You bastard!”

Raul stared straight at the knight, his eyes cold. “Don’t worry. I’ll go easy on you.”

“Does your arrogance never end?!”

“Mm... Must you be so hackneyed?” He wasn’t really trying to insult them. Knocking them out instead of killing them would wear down their morale more. Plus, there was no meaning in being victorious over them here.

“Mmph!” Harriet called for him even with her mouth covered. Raul’s men were on the roof of the church, pulling her up by rope. So as long as she made it to the top, she’d be safe. From the sound of her voice, he figured it should only be a few more meters now.

It’d be even simpler if all I had to do was let her get away.

He had plenty of chances to do so. In Fabrannia, on the way over, and in the last few days here in Galkhein too.

But there’s no meaning in that either. If Harriet disappears here, Fabrannia will just accuse her of some crime and hunt her down to keep her quiet.

If that happened, she would have no way out. Siguel would just end up paying for the crimes she’d allegedly committed.

“Chief! We’re at the upper window. We can get out from here!”

“Got it. Counting on you.”

“Don’t let Harriet get away—gah!” The knight lost consciousness when a thrown knife stabbed her leg. Each knife had been coated with an undiluted paralysis drug.

Raul got up on the pews and used their backs as stepping stones, leaping from one to another. He jumped into the center aisle and turned

his back to the door, blocking the knights' path.

"Twelve more?"

"Augh! Kill him!"

The knights lunged at him as one. Raul dodged with the nimbleness of a cat and tossed five thin knives out in an arc around him. His aim was true; all five knights crumpled to the ground.

Then he knelt and put a hand on the floor. He swept the legs out from under the remaining knights charging at him, and they all toppled to the ground almost comically. No matter how dirty the methods of the Fabrannian knights, when it came to their swordplay, they were straightforward to a fault. Raul, on the other hand, found fighting fair and square boring.

Results are all that matters. No matter how you do it, if you fulfill your objective, you win.

He cut down their numbers in no time, until only three knights remained. Raul smiled and loosed a breath. "You know, I found a real detailed plan about the counterfeiting when I snuck into your country."

"What?"

"It was written in King Walter's own hand, and it even had his signature! I'd expect nothing less of His Majesty! He must have been so proud of his plan that he wanted to make sure everyone knew it was his idea!"

"Th-there's no way you have something like that!"

The knight was right, of course. No matter how stupid the king was, he wouldn't leave behind such hard evidence. But it didn't matter that this document didn't exist; Raul could simply fabricate it into being. He had learned King Walter's handwriting during his reconnaissance on Fabrannia. In fact, he'd already crafted such a document before he enacted his plan.

"The thing about people is that they much prefer an interesting lie to the boring truth."

"You bastard!"

"I know all about that, since lying is my job and whatnot. If I spin a fascinating tale and add some shocking evidence to back it up, plenty of people will gobble it up as the truth."

He was sure Fabrannia understood. They were using the same psychology in their attempts to pin crimes on Harriet and sully Galkhein's reputation.

"People will treat even baseless rumors as the truth if they really want to, so..." Raul grinned and unsheathed another knife. "Let me give you the corpse of someone who opposed Fabrannia."

"What?!" The knights all went pale with disbelief.

"To be precise, the body of a Siguelian mercenary carrying a stolen document bearing Walter's signature. What do you think will happen if such a corpse is discovered in Galkhein, where Fabrannia has no influence?"

"Y-you can't be serious..."

"Oh, but I am! Rumors will spread, eventually reaching official channels! Once the international community begins to suspect Fabrannia, they'll have no way out, will they?"

The knights recoiled from Raul. "Are you insane?! All for that, you would—"

"Die? Yes, I would. It's the fastest way to get what I want, with the fewest casualties." Raul held up the knife and waved it back and forth. "There's poison on this blade. A deadly poison that will cause me to go out suffering. If I'm found dead, by this poison, it'll just add momentum to the rumors."

"Try it. If you kill yourself, all we must do is dispose of your corpse."

"Unfortunately, some of my subordinates are still here watching. As soon as I die, they'll cause a commotion that will draw civilians to the scene."

Once that happened, not only would they be unable to hide his corpse, but they would also be spotted by a great number of witnesses.

Well, this is about all I can do, I suppose. Raul smiled wanly, watching the knights. *I made sure to paralyze that Rishe girl... Now Galkhein will be able to prove that they were just a victim caught up in all this.*

He almost felt bad for the trouble he was causing them. His smile twisted with the irony. If anything, he should have had a grudge against this country. *I told my men to slow down Galkhein's crown prince without*

killing him if he came after me too.

If he knocked out all the knights, then it wouldn't make sense that they'd killed him. Even if the three knights still standing went after Harriet, he knew his subordinates would be able to fight them off.

"Thanks for playing along, girls. Guess it's time to finish this." Raul spun the knife around and pointed the blade at himself.

"Wait! Don't make another move!"

"I don't think so. I'm gonna have to ask you to stay put."

Now he could at least protect Harriet. It had been a long time since he was able to smile with such genuine happiness. Light shone through a stained-glass window like the clouds had parted. But right as he held the blade to his throat under that light's blessing, he sensed something strange.

"Huh?" Raul's head shot up. He saw a painting of the goddess that spanned the whole ceiling—but there was no time to admire it, as the stained glass in one of the church's upper windows shattered.

"Wh..."

The stained glass twinkled in the air as it fell, its kaleidoscopic fragments glittering in the sunlight. A figure followed their trajectory, shielding herself from the hail of glass. To Raul's shock, her coral hair fluttered in the wind.

A girl in a brown cloak fell toward him, her skirt billowing around her. No, she was so graceful, it was less like she was falling and more like she was descending from on high. The black sword in her hand didn't match her slight build.

In midair, she yanked her hood down on her head, curled up, and rolled upon impact with the floor. The cloak she wore was made of the same fabric the hunters donned when they went into the forest. Protected from the glass shards by the sturdy fabric, she shot to her feet and drew her sword. Then she struck the knife from Raul's hand.

"Ah!"

Surprise had slackened his grip, so his knife went clattering halfway across the church floor. The girl spun around, whipped her sword as if dancing, and charged at the Fabrannian knights. With all-too-abrupt cries, the remaining three knights fell to the floor. Raul watched all this happen, dumbfounded to the core.

“Raul!”

He snapped out of it when Rishe called his name. But this wasn't possible. She couldn't be here. He'd seen her drink the laced tea himself just a short while ago. And he didn't understand why she hadn't come charging through the door but crashing through the window instead.



“Didn’t I tell you that if you were going to save Lady Harriet, I wanted to help you? I can’t let you sacrifice yourself just because you want to rescue her!” As though it were the most natural thing in the world, she said, “That’s why I’m here to save you.”

The words rendered him dizzy.

“Are you all right? You haven’t gotten hurt or taken poison too hastily, have you? Just get away from here for now, and we can talk about this later.”

“Wait a second... This is no time to be worrying about me. That’s not all the Fabrannian knights.” He was sure his subordinates wouldn’t screw up and get caught, which meant that the remaining dozen or so knights were still watching outside the church. “The church is surrounded. If you don’t get out of here, you won’t be safe either—”

Suddenly, the church doors swung open, silencing Raul. He drew a knife and ran in front of Rishe, but the interloper was no Fabrannian enemy.

You’ve gotta be kidding me!

“Prince Arnold!” Rishe cried. A broad and dazzling smile bloomed on her face, her emerald, gemlike eyes sparkling as if she were looking at precious treasure.

The target of her tender gaze was a stoic lady-killer wearing an almost bored expression.

“What are you doing here?” Raul asked. “And what about the knights?”

“Already taken care of.” Arnold Hein strolled toward him. Beyond the open doors was exactly the implied spectacle: All of Fabrannia’s remaining knights were sprawled out on the ground, unconscious.

This can’t be happening. I told my men in town to stop Arnold Hein if they saw him!

“I’m sorry, Raul. I borrowed your bow and arrows and knocked out the rest of your men.”

“Bwuh?” Raul was speechless.

Arnold Hein walked past him and pulled back the girl’s hood. “Are you hurt, Rishe?”

“Nope. As you can see, there’s not a scratch on me.”

You took a powerful drug, made special by an expert hunter...

If Rishe was telling the truth, she had breezed through a town with expert archers stationed throughout, crashed through a stained-glass window, rolled when she hit the ground, and fought off several knights. Yet there really wasn't a mark on her.

As for Arnold Hein, he'd fought over ten knights without even making a sound detectable to Raul's ears.

"Hold on a second... Seriously, give me a break!" Raul clutched his forehead. If Rishe had at least entered through the door normally, he wouldn't have been so stunned that he botched his suicide. But he hadn't expected her to drop in from *above*. As a result, he had completely lost the will to carry out his plan.

"You two are monsters, husband and wife both..."

Rishe's cheeks flared. "W-we're not married yet!"

Raul was utterly baffled that *that* was what offended her. *After all that, you're blushing like a shy little maiden!*

Rishe fixed him with a petulant glare. Raul had no idea what to make of her, truly.

Dammit. She's adorable.

Unfortunately, that was the only poisoned knife he had. He felt as if his own immaturity had been thrown back in his face. His pride for thinking there was not a chance he could fail was shaken.

It didn't even matter how well I lied.

I'm so glad I made it in time!

Rishe sighed as she sheathed the black sword. The blade she'd knocked from Raul's hands had been coated with poison. She could just imagine the sort of terrible plan he'd been trying to enact.

That bad feeling I had was spot-on. If Raul was really trying to get away, even Prince Arnold's Imperial Guards wouldn't have been able to find him so easily.

Raul had been too unguarded throughout this whole incident.

Rishe knew there was no way he'd tell her his whole plot even if she'd uncovered part of it. And if he wanted to drug someone, he'd find a way to drug everyone even if they turned down the drink he offered.

If he just wanted to abduct and kill Lady Harriet, he wouldn't have done it in a conspicuous place like an abandoned church. The reason he picked it was to make use of the high ceilings... He chose a battlefield that would be advantageous to his hunters.

When she'd arrived with Arnold, the Fabrannian knights had been guarding the church entrances. Rishe had predicted that, so she'd asked Arnold to handle them and climbed up to the roof to enter from there. She had thought it was the best option, but for some reason, Arnold was standing in front of her now looking dour.

"Did you really have to break the stained glass?"

"I thought it would draw everyone's attention if I made a racket."

There were normal windows too, which the hunters had no doubt used to extricate Harriet, but she didn't think she could have stopped Raul if she'd used one of them. However, it did pain her to have broken the stained glass.

"I'm sorry about the damage. I must write a letter to Bishop Schneider and apologize."

"The church was going to be demolished anyway. As long as you're not hurt, you can ignore the rest."

"That won't do. What if there's a problem during the demolition now?"

This was hardly the most important matter at hand, of course. Perched up on the back of one of the pews, with a hand cradling his forehead, Raul gave off an aura that Rishe had never once seen around him in her fifth loop. Just when she was about to call out to him, there was a pained shout from the direction of the door.

"Raul!"

"Lady Harriet?!"

Harriet burst into the church, breath shallow. She must have run straight here without resting.

"Y-you're alive!" Her voice was faint, verging on sobs, but Harriet didn't collapse. She pressed her lips into a thin line and shifted her eyes

from Raul to Rishe. She then plummeted to her knees and bowed so low, she was practically pressing her forehead into the floor.

“Y-Your Highness Prince Arnold, Lady Rishe! I’m...terribly sorry!”

“Ack! Lady Harriet! Please raise your head! It’s all right...”

There were ugly welts on Harriet’s pale wrists. She must have tried desperately to escape her bonds. The blood oozing from the wounds made it clear just how much she’d struggled.

Her head still bowed, Harriet pleaded through ragged pants. “I know I caused a great deal of trouble to Galkhein... I take full responsibility for all of Raul’s actions!”

“Stop, Harriet.” Raul suddenly stood and dropped on one knee next to her. “You weren’t involved in any of this. You know it doesn’t mean anything if you apologize.”

“No! How could I be uninvolved when you did all this to save me? I—ghk!” Harriet started coughing uncontrollably. She must have really been having trouble breathing. Rishe couldn’t bear to watch and tried to run to her, but Arnold caught her by the arm.

“Prince Arnold, she...”

Instead, Arnold stepped forward. Harriet winced at the sound of his footsteps.

Raul frowned, then looked up at Arnold and offered him a flippant smile. “Your Highness, I assure you Harriet had nothing to do with my plans.”

The prince said nothing. He just stared at Raul. Rishe couldn’t see his expression, but it was probably his familiar cold look.

“I’ll tell you everything I had planned, all right? I don’t care what you do with me after that. You can chop my head off or use me as a punching bag or whatever else you’d prefer to do.”

“Raul! St-stop...please!”

Before Harriet could say anything more, Arnold asked Raul, “What do you plan to do after that?”

“What a cruel question.” Raul winced and put on a grim, self-deprecating smile. “I denigrated the great country of Galkhein. The only way I can atone is with my life, right?” He still spoke with nonchalance, as if his apology couldn’t possibly be genuine, but Rishe knew that he

did everything for a reason.

Raul's being insolent on purpose. He wants Prince Arnold's anger to fall on him instead of Lady Harriet.

"Taking responsibility only means something if someone capable says it," Arnold said, indifferent.

Harriet shrank in on herself.

"The same goes for inane offers to give up one's life," he continued. "Your life is worthless to me."

Raul smiled and cocked his head. "I wish you would have let me die like I intended, then. My whole plan was ruined thanks to your unexpected intrusion."

"Raul, you really were planning on dying to save Lady Harriet from Fabrannia, weren't you?" Rishe put the pieces together on Raul's plan. She knew what his true feelings were. He'd told her in her fifth loop.

"I know I don't look it, but I'm very loyal to the Siguel royal family." He'd said that in a future where he hadn't been able to save Harriet. As his former companion, Rishe could tell when he was passing his true feelings off as a joke.

Lips still quirked upward, Raul said, "Well, what else was I supposed to do? If I accused Fabrannia of counterfeiting openly, they'd just make Harriet their scapegoat. I had to scheme if I wanted to protect both Siguel *and* Harriet."

He was right about that. Even if the accusation came from Galkhein, Fabrannia would refuse to be held accountable for their crimes. They would fight the accusation, and there were sure to be countries who allied themselves with Fabrannia. There might even be countries who declared war in the resulting confusion. It wouldn't be strange if the accusation caused a whole new war apart from the one Arnold himself would start. And no one could say how Galkhein's current emperor would react to all this. Arnold knew that better than anyone else.

That's why Raul almost poisoned himself. With Raul's death, Siguel would have more credibility and Fabrannia would be at a disadvantage.

Maybe he had even forged some evidence that would accelerate the process. Rishe could imagine just the sort of plot Raul had cooked

up.

“Naturally, I have no intention of letting Fabrannia’s counterfeiting attempts stand,” Arnold said.

“Prince Arnold!” Rishe looked up at him from his side. “I beg of you, give me some time! Just like with Coyolles, I’ll think of a way for Galkhein to form an alliance with Siguel.”

Before, Arnold said that there was a way for Rishe to save Harriet as the crown princess rather than a knight. If she could think of a reason for Galkhein to ally with Siguel that wouldn’t provoke the current emperor’s suspicions, then their relationship with Siguel would aid them immensely in a conflict with Fabrannia. Even if Fabrannia tried to pin the counterfeiting on Siguel, with Galkhein as their allies, they would be safe from any military action from Fabrannia. Rishe vowed to find a path to that future. But Arnold wasn’t even looking at her.

“Listen to me, Your Highness!”

“There’s no need for that.” His words were cold, and Rishe’s breath hitched when she heard them. But Arnold was quick to add, “Our country is planning to overhaul the currency soon.”

Rishe blinked, not expecting him to bring that up now.

“I’ve thought for some time now that our current system of currency is naturally limited. Gold and silver are finite resources—we’ll run out of them one day.”

Both Raul and Harriet struggled to grasp what Arnold was getting at.

“If you make your currency more complex to prevent counterfeiting, it becomes more expensive to produce. More advanced technology is required to mint it, and mass production becomes very difficult. To solve this problem, we must come at it from a new direction.”

“What do you mean by that?” Rishe asked.

“I mean money that’s cheaper to produce than gold and silver coins, using resources we mustn’t worry will run out. The new currency must be possible to mass-produce while being difficult to counterfeit.” Arnold regarded Harriet and Raul and told them plainly, “Our best possible option right now is paper currency.”

Harriet gaped at Arnold. Even Raul was incredulous. The cogs of Rishe's mind, however, were already turning.

Is this what Prince Arnold meant by what he said yesterday?

Arnold evidently had a different idea when the topic of reminting came up. Yet when Rishe and Oliver had asked him about it, he had rejected it himself.

"It's a completely unrealistic plan."

"It's stupid. Practically fantasy. My 'other idea' is something I've already tossed out without consideration."

And in response, Rishe had asked him, *"If you put your mind to it, don't you think you could really achieve it?"* and Arnold had rejected that as well.

"Who's going to believe in something that's intangible?" he'd admonished, but he wasn't talking to Rishe. He was saying it to himself.

Something had changed Arnold's mind.

"Paper money..." Rishe murmured, and Arnold answered her.

"Of course, paper has no inherent value. These sheets of paper—these *notes*—would be worth an amount of gold or silver written on them that they could be exchanged for."

Rishe understood Arnold's vision at last. "So you would use that paper in place of coins for transactions? And when you need actual gold and silver, you could exchange it at a currency exchange just like now?"

"Right. It wouldn't be as difficult to carry an equivalent amount of money because paper is so much more portable. And even if a country's supply of gold and silver ran out, as long as they could reliably issue currency, there would be no damage to their economy as a result."

The value of gold coins was guaranteed by the actual gold content in the coins. Arnold's plan removed that notion entirely. Day-to-day transactions would take place not with currency that was worth its inherent value but with notes that could be exchanged for that amount.

There's not a single country in the world doing things that way.

Rishe's heart hammered at the possibilities. *Prince Arnold is creating a new system here and now! He's doing something no one's ever tried before!*

"Coyolles's artisans will create the metal sheets used to print the notes." Arnold's words intensified the sparkle in Rishe's eyes. "One of

Michel Hévin's inventions included a paper and ink that were highly resistant to water—isn't that right, Rishe?"

"Er, yes. Not just water—it was resistant to friction as well, if I recall correctly."

"A new invention by an alchemist should be difficult for seedier types to get their hands on and forge, which means it will fulfill our original objective of preventing counterfeiting as well."

Rishe's head bobbed in excitement.

"We'll need to utilize the Aria Trading Company's connections to facilitate the circulation of the notes. I'm sure they're capable of that, given their data-gathering skills. That being said..." Arnold lowered his gaze. "Even if we have the ink and paper and craft a detailed metal sheet, we won't be able to realize this plan without the ability to mass-produce printed material."

Just then, the last piece of the puzzle slid into place. Rishe and Arnold had read books they'd received from Siguel the night Harriet and Raul arrived. Books with intricate cover designs and finely printed details.

"Siguel has advanced printing technology, does it not?"

"Oh!" Harriet exclaimed.

"Galkhein finds itself in a position to ask for Siguel's assistance. Siguel's printing technology will be indispensable for my country's future currency minting enterprises. For that reason, I'd like to propose an alliance with Siguel," Arnold finished.

To think Arnold had requested an alliance with another country himself! Rishe had never imagined such a thing. When Coyolles had proposed an alliance, Arnold had answered by saying, "*I'd much rather conquer a country than ally with one,*" but things were different this time. Rishe's heart thumped with exhilaration.

Raul, meanwhile, couldn't hide his confusion. "Wait a second. This is a fantasy. Paper money? You really think your country's economy will run on that?"

The prince's gaze turned on him.

Standing at Harriet's side, Raul said, "For this ridiculous notion to come from Galkhein's crown prince of all people... Who's going to believe in something so far-fetched?"

Arnold knew precisely what Raul meant. In fact, he'd once felt the same way. He had dismissed his own idea before, not even letting Oliver hear of it.

"You're right," Arnold said simply. "Who's going to believe in something intangible?" He looked at Rishe by his side. "I thought that way at first as well." After meeting her eyes, Arnold smirked a little and continued in a softer voice, "But there are people in this world who fear ghosts."

Rishe flushed, not expecting Arnold to shine a light on her anxieties. She knew he wasn't teasing her, though.

"Those affiliated with the Church believe in the existence of the goddess, but whether She's real or not isn't what's important to them. It's simply a matter of faith."

She knew what Arnold was trying to say. It was the same thing they'd spoken about in bed the previous night. Rishe's belief in ghosts and the Church's faith in the goddess were unshakable convictions. Some things existed whether they had a tangible form or not. Like Arnold's desire to show Rishe the ocean, which he'd only just revealed to her.

"Currency is issued by the nation. It can be guaranteed not by the value inherent in the physical coins but by the faith people have in the country that issues it. That faith is the same whether the money is coins or notes."

It's just as His Highness says. After all, foreign money may have the same gold in it, but you don't use it every day.

Rishe understood that wasn't the same thing as Arnold's paper money plan, but she believed it was the same idea.

"Incremental adjustments will be made to build trust in this new money. I believe that it is our actions as a nation that will determine whether we earn that trust."

"Didn't expect that coming from you. So the lofty royal will just tell all the people below him to believe in him?"

"Faith in the political system is not gained with words. It's a matter of whether my actions have answered the needs of the people up to this point and whether I'll be able to create a system that they think merits their trust." Arnold regarded Rishe again. "And if faith in the

nation isn't yet strong enough, I need simply borrow the name of something people *do* believe in. Even if that something is the goddess."

"Prince Arnold...are you saying you'll request assistance from the Crusade?"

This was yet another suggestion Rishe could never have envisioned the Arnold of even a few *days* ago making. Arnold despised the Church. She had never even considered that he might try to borrow their good name.

"Even if we use new materials, there are bound to be counterfeiting attempts. To thwart those, I intend to have Theodore use his network to keep an eye on the underworld."

"My, Prince Arnold!" Rishe was ecstatic from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. "I'm sure they'll be thrilled to help! Prince Theodore, the Aria Trading Company, Coyolles...Professor Michel and the Crusade too!" She grabbed Arnold's sleeve, trying to convey her happiness in that small action. "With your political skills and Siguel's printing technology, this plan is by no means a fantasy! It's very much realistic!"

Arnold's expression softened ever so slightly as he gazed at Rishe. "It's because you're here that this fantasy is becoming a reality. These connections are only possible because of *your* coming to Galkhein."

Rishe tilted her head to the side and corrected Arnold. "That's not true, Prince Arnold."

"What?"

"It was *you* who allowed me to trade freely with the Aria Trading Company after coming to this country."

Normally, a hostage like Rishe would never be allowed such a freedom. Arnold's generosity allowed her to engage in not just shopping but also real business dealings.

"The same goes for you reconciling with your brother and - pardoning Professor Michel for setting off fireworks in the middle of town. Forming a technological alliance with Coyolles because of their metalworking capabilities and a partnership with the Crusade Church were both things that you did as well, Prince Arnold."

These were not connections that Rishe made. They were decisions made by Arnold himself, bonds formed due to his interactions with

people.

“You once said that you preferred conquering other countries to allying yourself with them.” She knew that wasn’t true. “Our connections to other countries are all things you forged through *your* choices, Prince Arnold.”

Arnold widened his eyes in surprise, and then they crinkled as he smiled. “No...these are without a doubt *your* doing.”

That didn’t quite sit right with Rische, but Arnold seemed happy about it, so she didn’t argue. Raul and Harriet, meanwhile, gawked at Rische and Arnold as they complimented each other.

“Who are you two, really? The *Crusade’s* going to help Galkhein?”

“Ugh, I-I can’t quite keep up with all of this... Now, Raul!” Harriet took a shaky breath, then steeled herself. “F-Father and my brother might be surprised, but I want to try to convince them. Siguel’s been at the mercy of Fabrannia all this time, but...”

“...Harriet.”

“If we’re going to have a relationship with a country other than Fabrannia, then we can’t just let them protect us for nothing in return anymore. We must move forward using the technology we’ve cultivated.”

Harriet knew what she was proposing was no easy task. Sure enough, her voice quivered—but the fear had vanished from her eyes.

“I-I’ve always been proud of the beautiful books Siguel produces. It’s something we do all on our own, without support from anyone else. So if we’re going to have a reciprocal relationship with another country, then...” She clenched her small hands into fists. “No matter how weak and small we are...I want us to change, so that we can be proud of what we’ve done all by ourselves.”

Raul frowned, a truly rare expression for him. “That’s big talk, Harriet. It’s not so easy to change the way a whole country works.”

“B-but, if you don’t resolve yourself to change, then nothing ever will!” Despite her shaking, there was strength behind her words.

His frown slid into a grimace. “I can’t believe you...” He put a hand to his forehead and sighed a long, long sigh. “I’m a complete failure as a hunter. The princess looks at me like this, and I can’t even bring myself to abscond with her.”

Rishe was pleased to hear it. *I never saw Raul that exasperated in my entire fifth loop.*

The whole time she had been with him, he had worn false smiles, hidden his true feelings, and lied as easily as he breathed. *I feel like he'll be all right now, though.*

Harriet, whom he wasn't able to save in that life, was right here. She would never dirty her hands with crimes she didn't wish to commit. And Raul, determined to protect her with his life, didn't need to die. Furthermore, true emotion shone naked on his face.

Rishe sighed in relief and looked up at Arnold. *Prince Arnold really is amazing*, she thought with a smile.

Arnold studied her with wide eyes. Then he frowned and asked, "Why do you look so happy just seeing my face?"

"What?!" Rishe yelped, covering her cheeks with her hands. "Did I look happy just now?!"

"You looked the same way when I entered the church earlier too."

Rishe couldn't recall the face she'd made when she saw him. It must have been an unconscious reaction.

Well, he took control of the church so quickly! Any swordsman would be impressed even if they didn't see it for themselves...

"Also, are you satisfied with that fight we were supposed to be having?"

That's right! We're supposed to be in the middle of a very important fight! Rishe recalled with a start.

Arnold taunted her with his smile. "Hmm?"

"N-not yet!" Rishe stammered. "There's plenty more that I must say on that subject!"

"I see. Well, I'll reserve my comments on you saying I could 'simply cut ties with you' to save myself outside my earshot for later, then."

"Ugh!"

Oliver had reported the whole thing to Arnold, just as Rishe expected he might. Rishe was ready to tear her hair out as Arnold grinned at her combatively.

“You’d better brace yourself.”

“Hmph! Same to you, Your Highness!” Rishe leveled a glare at him, her declaration of war. Then she ran to Harriet and embraced her.

Finally, she looked to Raul, who had taken a roundabout way to get what he wanted. The man had a self-conscious look on his face. That, too, was likely true emotion.

Rishe found that so funny...and a little nostalgic to boot.

Epilogue

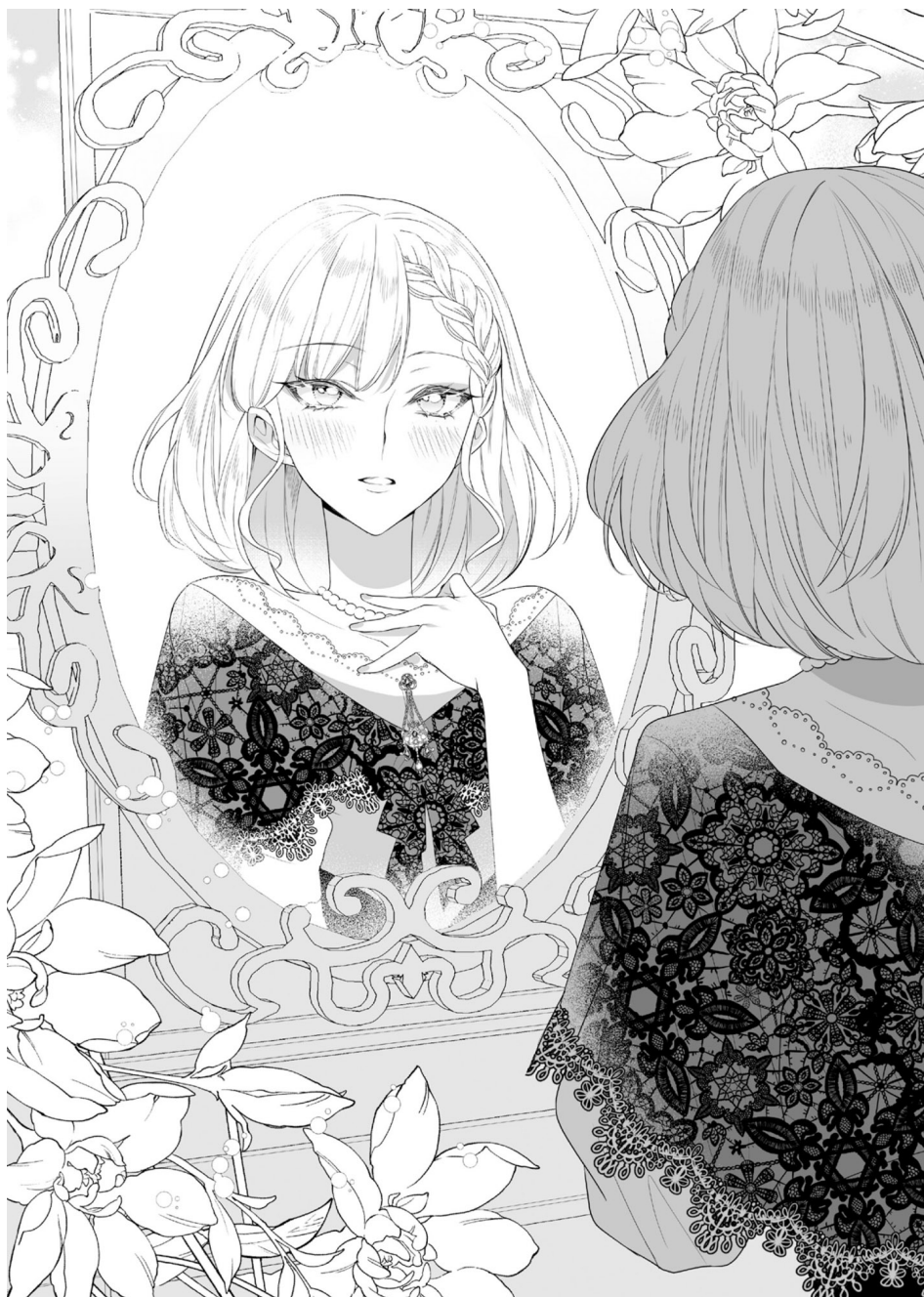
THE RAYS OF THE SUMMER sun poured in through the window while a sea breeze rustled the curtains. Harriet was seated in front of a mirror, with Rishe standing behind her. Finished at last, Rishe put the scissors down and removed the cape over Harriet's shoulders.

"What do you think, Lady Harriet?"

Harriet's golden hair slid off the cape. Looking in the mirror, she noted that her locks were now up to her shoulders and her bangs were freshly trimmed. "Thank you, Lady Rishe!"

"It suits you spectacularly," Rishe gushed as she put her scissors away. "And if it's only shoulder length, it will dry much quicker, which leaves you more time for reading after a bath! The new makeup looks fantastic as well."

The princess had on different makeup than what she'd tried the other day. This makeup emphasized the sharp-looking, almond-shaped eyes that had bothered her so much, granting her a dignified appearance. The makeup she'd tried before had softened her appearance; this time, Rishe had utilized the opposite approach.



“I-It’s strange... It brings out the harshness of my eyes, but I don’t hate it...”

“This is yet another function of makeup. You mustn’t always hide the parts of your face that you don’t like. You can bring out the best of them as well.”

“Bring out the best of them...” Harriet considered Rishe’s words. “Right, I see what you mean. I can’t just keep disliking parts of myself...”

Harriet studied herself in the mirror as if hardening her resolve. “Lady Rishe, I...I want to try! I always hated my personality, but I might be able to do something for my country. I’m a coward, but maybe I can bring out the best of myself and engage in careful politics!”

“Oh, Lady Harriet...”

It had been two days since Harriet’s abduction. The Fabrannian knights had been arrested and were currently being interrogated by Arnold’s Imperial Guards. Arnold was sure to work with Siguel on the accusations of counterfeiting and on Siguel’s future. He’d already sent a missive to Siguel. Harriet included her own letter, so this time, the real Curtis would come to negotiate with them.

I don’t think Lady Harriet is a coward...

It took a considerable amount of courage to stand before Arnold and claim all responsibility for the incident. Harriet had plenty of possibilities in her own future that she hadn’t yet realized.

“Lady Rishe...I’m going to break off my engagement to King Walter. This will impact Siguel’s place on our own continent.” Harriet looked at Rishe with fierce determination in her eyes. “But that’s why I’m going to try! Not as a doll of a princess but as a real person who thinks for herself! It...it might not be possible for someone like me, but...I don’t want to use that as a reason not to try!” Having said her piece, Harriet covered her face in embarrassment.

Rishe smiled. “I’ll do whatever I can to help. That includes looking after your health, Lady Harriet.”

Harriet lifted her head and picked up a small bottle on top of the dresser. “I’m still putting the medicine on my eyelids! I feel like the brightness isn’t bothering me as much anymore...”

“That’s good. You aren’t furrowing your brow as much as before

either, are you? And I can tell that you're making an effort to blink regularly, so I think you'll recover quickly!"

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door—it was the head maid.

"Oh!"

"Lady Rishe, Prince Curtis is calling for you."

"Thank you, Miss Head Maid."

The head maid's eyebrows lifted ever so slightly when she caught sight of Harriet. Harriet flinched at first but soon straightened her back.

Seeing that, the head maid murmured, "You look beautiful, Your Highness."

"Huh?!"

"Lady Rishe, please come with me. I will walk you there."

Rishe nodded and shot a look at Harriet that promised they'd see each other after. Smiling and waving back to her, Harriet genuinely glowed. Her summery dress and medium-length blonde hair suited her perfectly.

I'm so glad! I'm sure Miss Head Maid and Lady Harriet will be able to get along a lot better now too.

Still grinning, she went out into the hallway and made her way toward Raul with the head maid.

The head maid was silent for a time before turning to Rishe and telling her, "I may resign as Her Highness's maid."

Rishe wheeled on her, surprised.

Stoic as ever, the head maid continued, "I was of no help to her when Fabrannia abducted her. I'm so harsh to her every day, but I had no idea about the counterfeiting. When she needed me most, I couldn't protect her..."

"Wait a second, Miss Head Maid! The way I heard it, you tried to protect Lady Harriet with your life, and she was very grateful to you."

"The results are what really matter." Evidently, she wasn't strict just with Harriet but with herself as well.

Rishe frowned and tried to convey a portion of her thoughts. "I think going forward, Lady Harriet will find it very reassuring to have someone at her side who will be her ally no matter what happens."

“But—”

“The reason I thought you were from Siguel and not Fabrannia was that it seemed to me like you scolded Lady Harriet as if you were her mother.” At that, the head maid’s eyes went round. Rishe smiled and added, “Of course, I do hope that you could scold her a little more gently in the future.”

“Even if I do continue to serve her, I’m not sure there’s anything I can scold her for anymore,” the head maid murmured, turning back in the direction of Harriet’s room. “She’s stopped slouching all on her own, hasn’t she?”

When she faced Rishe once more, the head maid wore a smile that was refreshed and just a little lonely.

Rishe returned her smile, nodded, and continued on her way.

When she arrived at Raul’s room, Rishe wasn’t quite sure what to make of the sight before her.

“I caused you all a lot of trouble.”

She could have rubbed her eyes in disbelief. The chief, who had all the flippancy of a jester and only apologized once in a blue moon, was bowing in deep deference to her.

I’ve never seen Raul so repentant!

Rishe found herself looking around for a clue as to how to proceed. But she’d parted with the head maid in the hallway, so she and Raul were alone in the room.

Raul wasn’t dressed as Curtis at the moment. He was supposed to continue acting as the prince’s stand-in until the real one arrived, but Curtis had a habit of shutting himself in his room sometimes, so Raul was using that as an excuse to shed the disguise.

“Don’t apologize, Raul. You haven’t done anything to harm me.”

“I’ve done you no harm? Are you serious?”

“Of course I’m serious. It’s the truth.”

He was utterly taken aback. Narrowing his eyes, he said, “If that’s

what you think after a man drugged you, I'm really starting to sympathize with the crown prince..."

Huh?! Where does Prince Arnold factor into this?!

She didn't understand, but she also felt like she couldn't ask about it. All she could do was squeeze her mouth shut.

Raul shrugged and added, "Still, I can't be contented with that. I plan to pay you back for all the trouble I've caused."

That line was familiar to Rishe. At the beginning of her fifth life, Rishe saved a man who was alone in a forest. Using her knowledge as an apothecary, she treated his injury and carried him back to the hut he was using as his lair. That injured man had been Raul. Now that she thought back on it, it was rare for him to sport such severe injuries. Maybe he was panicking at the time because he didn't have a way to save Harriet.

After he recovered, Raul told Rishe, *"I plan to pay you back for all the trouble I've caused you."* At the time, she still hadn't decided what sort of life she planned to live yet.

Rishe had answered, *"Will you teach me how to use a bow, then?"*

"A bow? What's a fancy lady like yourself going to do with such a skill?"

"I don't have any particular plans. I just like learning new things." She remembered meeting Raul's gaze head-on, excited about what sort of new knowledge and skills she could gain, and him smiling in amusement.

"Now, what will you ask of me?"

Rishe looked right into Raul's red eyes and told him, "If you'll do what I ask, then I'd like you to rely on your companions more."

Raul gaped at her. "What?"

"The person who taught me how to use a bow a long time ago was just like you. He took everything on himself and was always smiling and lying. He was physically beside me, but it was as if he was a formless ghost."

In her fifth life, Raul had smiled and said, *"That's not true,"* but she thought her words might reach him now.

"I don't want you to take everything on yourself like you did this

time. I want you to show everyone around you what your face looks like when you're happy and when you're sad."

"Me?"

"That's right. I could never get my teacher to understand that, all the way until the end."

Rishe was sure that Raul had also died in the forest where her life ended. Galkhein invaded and razed it to the ground so that there were no trees left where a hunter could hide. Raul had protected his troop and fought to defend Siguel's knights, and Rishe was sure that his injuries had been more extensive than hers.

"If you'll do as I ask, I want you to live the rest of your life that way. I want to see your real smile, when you really feel happy or contented."

Raul appeared to be gazing into the far distance even though he was facing Rishe. "You're so cute." Then he said the exact same thing he'd said to Rishe a few days ago. "In fact, I want you to be *my* wife instead of the crown prince's."

"Honestly... I'm telling you, you don't need to joke like that anymore."

"Yes, yes, that's right. You're going to be Arnold Hein's wife, after all."

"Hrk!" It was the truth, but it felt strangely embarrassing to hear him say it. Rishe screwed her face up into a grimace, and Raul took a slow breath.

"Even if you're in a political marriage...and you're marrying royalty of Galkhein..."

"...Raul?"

There was a soft smile on Raul's face as he gazed at Rishe. "I pray that you find happiness."

"Yes. Of course I will!"

With that, Rishe took her leave.

Time passed in an astonishingly quick manner as Rishe tried to summon all sorts of resolve. The soft sound of the waves echoed on the beach at dusk. Rishe looked down at her pocket watch and took a deep breath, thinking to herself, *Just ten minutes now.*

She entertained the thought that she might be able to gain some semblance of calm in the next ten minutes, but that idea was shattered when the person she was waiting for called out to her.



“Rishe.”

Instantly, Rishe shot up and spun in the direction of the castle. “Prince Arnold!”

Arnold walked down the sunset-stained beach, eyes squinting in the bright light.

“Oliver told me you requested my presence. Did something happen?”

“I just wanted to talk to you, Your Highness.” Rishe ran to the prince and steadied her breathing before looking up at him. “I wanted to...make up, after our fight.”

“...”

“Lately, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking by myself while you’ve been busy, Your Highness.” Rishe clutched her dress. “I’ve come to realize that I’ve been selfish.”

“That’s not true.”

Rishe blinked at these unexpected words from Arnold.

“I didn’t say enough.”

“Pardon, Your Highness?”

“The methods I’ve taken with you are indefensible.” Arnold reached out and tucked a stray lock of hair behind Rishe’s ear. He spoke slowly and deliberately. “Abducting a bride from a foreign country as a hostage... It’s the method my father has always employed.”

Arnold had told her once before that his father kept other countries under his control by demanding female hostages and marrying them.

“I’ve always hated how he does things, yet I ended up employing the same methods to make you my wife.” There was no distinct emotion on Arnold’s face save for his eyes, where a whole storm of emotions was flashing past. “I forced you to give me your hand and stole your future.”

Rishe’s breath caught.

“There’s nothing more I can ask of you. I don’t have the right.” Arnold scowled. It seemed like he was in pain but was trying to ignore it. “I don’t need anything more.”

Something in Rishe’s chest seemed to grind against itself. She was

sure that Arnold had never allowed himself to want anything before. He had lived without desires and without those desires being fulfilled his whole life—up until now. He may have been the crown prince of a great nation, but he could probably count on one hand the number of things he'd obtained for himself in his life thus far. Rishe could tell as much even without him saying so directly.

“The point I have reflected on most is just that, Your Highness,” she interjected, earning a dubious frown from him. “I realized that your not wanting anything of me, the reason you think that way—it ultimately stems from me.”

“Hrm?”

“I thought back to the moment that you proposed to me.”

That night, Arnold had knelt before Rishe. “*I’m apologizing for my baseless impertinence. Also, I’m asking you...*” He had taken Rishe’s hand, looked into her eyes and finished, “*...to become my wife.*”

“I replied, ‘I reject your proposal,’ didn’t I?”

“Yeah.”

Rishe cast her gaze to the sand, took a deep breath, and then met Arnold’s eyes once more. “I’d like to redo that proposal.”

Before he could respond, Rishe reached for Arnold’s left hand. It was a large, beautiful hand. Not just because of the shape of his nails and the tendons underneath his skin; even the rough swordsman’s calluses were beautiful to Rishe.

“Rishe...?”

Rishe entwined her fingers with Arnold’s, desperately trying to convey her feelings to him. “I apologize for my impertinence back then. Also, I’m asking you...”

Mimicking Arnold’s actions from the night of his proposal, she pulled his left hand up to her mouth. Rishe steeled her nerves and kissed the base of Arnold’s ring finger. There was a light *smack* as her lips came away. She could’ve squirmed in embarrassment, what with the intimacy of the soft noise as her lips came away and the feeling that her heart was going to burst. She could feel her cheeks burning, so she hid her face in Arnold’s hand.

When she felt calmer, she locked eyes with him again and finished, “*...to become my husband.*”

Even her choice of words was an echo of Arnold's. Had he noticed?

Yes, Arnold had witnessed her proposal with wide eyes.

"What are you...?"

"There!" Rishe squeaked, her face bright red and her voice quavering despite her best efforts. "Now *both* of us wish for this engagement. So that means you didn't whisk me to Galkhein against my will!"



This was what Rishe had meant when she spoke of her selfishness. She'd been turning it over and over in her mind in the last couple of days when it finally hit her: Her initial rejection of Arnold's proposal was the source of his guilt. Her counterproposal should have undone it.

Yet Arnold gazed at her in silence.

"Did...did that not work?"

"..."

"I want to do everything in my power to grant any desires you might have of me. There are far fewer things I can do compared to you in your position, but..." Rishe scowled. "I want to spoil you in the same way you spoil me, Prince Arnold..."

If Rishe were to take a realistic view of matters, things probably wouldn't change between them. Arnold's heart remained unknowable to Rishe until she found a way in. And she still didn't know the real reason he'd proposed to her or the true goal of the war he would ignite in the future.

But as Rishe began to formulate the wish in her heart, Arnold pulled their entwined hands toward him—a movement that was gentle but assertive. And as Rishe collided with his chest, he threw his other arm over her back. He enveloped her as if he would never let her go and whispered into her ear, "I accept your proposal."

"Eep!"

His voice was low and husky, but she could hear every word clearly. "Will you stand by my side as my wife?"

"Ngh!" Rishe flinched at the ticklish sensation of his gentle voice in her ear. She agonized for a moment over where to put her hand before clutching the shirt fabric by his waist. "I'm already here, aren't I?"

"Not yet. We're not officially married yet." His voice was matter-of-fact—but there was a note of petulance as well, and Rishe wasn't sure what to do with that. In all practicality, there was nothing she *could* do about it. In both Rishe's homeland and this one, women couldn't marry until they were sixteen. Rishe's sixteenth birthday wasn't for another three weeks.

Since she couldn't grant his wish immediately, Rishe settled on a promise. "I will become your wife, Prince Arnold."

His embrace tightened, but it wasn't painful. In fact, it felt like he was holding back.

"Say it one more time."

It occurred to Rishe then that this was Arnold's way of making his desires known to her.

"Rishe," he repeated with a note of plaintiveness.

"Oh...just one more time?"

"..."

"If you don't mind, I'll repeat it as often as you like, Prince Arnold." If this was his first request of her, she would grant it wholeheartedly. Then she went over what she said and realized it made no sense. It was irrational to respond to a marriage proposal again and again. "I-I'm sorry... That's strange, isn't it?"

"No." Arnold smiled faintly. "I want to hear it."

Rishe let out a half squeal as her cheeks flushed deep scarlet. She pressed her forehead against Arnold to hide them, but she also didn't want to bother him by clinging in such a way. "I-I'm sorry...please let me stay like this for just a bit longer..."

"I don't mind." Arnold gave her a comforting pat on the back before saying, "I think you should put a little more meat on your bones, though."

"Huh?!" Rishe flinched. Her head almost shot up, but Arnold had her in such a firm hold that she couldn't move. "Are you saying I'm scrawny?!"

"No, it's just..."

She worried he meant her appearance was unbecoming of the crown princess, but as that didn't seem to be the case, relief flooded her.

Arnold rested his head on Rishe's shoulder and murmured, "It feels like if I'm too rough with you, I'll break you."

Shock and then amusement whipped through Rishe. "I won't break. It's okay."

When Arnold didn't respond, Rishe realized he was unconvinced. She squeezed Arnold with the same grip he had around her. "See?"

Arnold patted her back in understanding and slowly pulled away from her. "I'll be careful."

"All right." Apparently, her attempt to convince him of her hardness had been unsuccessful. His words caused a twinge in her heart.

Anyhow, I don't think our fight was all that successful. Oh well.

Rishe was satisfied with their reconciliation, at least. The thought made her smile as she gazed up at Arnold. Even on a sparkling beach bathed in the colors of sunset, Arnold's blue eyes far outclassed everything in their beauty.

"It's getting windy. Should we go back?" Arnold asked, holding out his hand to Rishe.

His offer to escort her was completely natural, which flustered her. She gingerly took his hand, trying not to let him see her nerves. And so the two of them walked off together.

I'm sure I can't begin to comprehend everything that's weighing on him. No matter how much I wish to change him, I know it won't be easy. Still, I hope that one day, Prince Arnold can at last express a desire for his own happiness.

She understood that, but she couldn't help wishing anyway.

No matter what ulterior motives were behind this proposal. Even if it's not with me.

Rishe would stop Arnold's war no matter what, regardless of whether that made her his enemy. She knew it was a betrayal to stay by his side while concealing her own ulterior motives.

I know all that, but...I want to make him happy.

Not through war—specifically Arnold's war, which caused so much suffering to so many people, him included. She wanted to show him a world where he could desire something and then obtain it without bloodshed.

"Rishe, what's wrong?"

She flashed Arnold a strained smile when he noticed her slowed pace. "It's nothing. Let's go back and eat! Of course, I can't put so much meat on my bones that I can't fit into my wedding dress."

"Don't worry. If it comes to it, I'll call as many tailors as needed

from all over the country until the dress fits you perfectly.”

“When you say that with such a straight face, it doesn’t sound like a joke, Prince Arnold. It’s kind of scary...”

Their light banter warmed her heart. She glanced back at the ocean every so often as they walked along the sunset beach. The light sparkled off the surface of the water, and Rishe squinted at it, Arnold’s hand firmly in hers.

The lapping of the waves echoed around the seaside castle after night fell. Raul silently opened a door and surveyed an empty reception room. Without permission from anyone, he plopped down on one of the couches. Only a few minutes later, hard footsteps echoed from the hall outside, and the door opened again.

Raul’s lips curled in a smile as he spoke with purposeful levity. “I snuck in here for your sake, but you have no intention of hiding at all, do you?”

He twisted around and put an elbow on the back of the couch as the other man gazed on in cold silence. Eventually, he went and sat on Raul’s other side, his elbow on the armrest and his chin in hand.

Making note of his actions, Raul prodded him once more. “So cold. We’re going to be working together, so you could stand to be friendlier, don’t you think?”

“I’m not here to banter with you.”

“Oh, fine. I owe you, so I’ll do whatever you ask, even if it’s something so nefarious that you can’t tell your beloved wife about it,” he said. “So let’s have that little secret chat you requested...Prince Arnold Hein.”

His face as cold as it was beautiful, Arnold regarded Raul with ice in his eyes.

To be continued...

Bonus Story: A Punishment Must Inspire Fear

“SO, WHAT DO YOU have to say for yourself?”

“I make no excuses for myself, Prince Arnold,” Rishe mumbled, hanging her head.

Arnold was seated on the couch across from her, his elbow on the armrest and his legs crossed. Rishe had her fists clenched atop her lap. They found themselves in this situation because of a secret that Raul-disguised-as-Curtis had disclosed after dinner earlier that day.

“You know, I fought your wife in an alley while she was guarding Harriet.”

“Ack! Wait, Raul...!”

“...”

Her protest hadn’t come fast enough. Raul had smirked and then followed Harriet out of the dining room. Left to clean up the mess, Rishe had turned around with much trepidation.

Standing from his seat with a coldness emanating from his face, Arnold had said, *“How about you give me the details in our room? Right now?”*

“Yes, sir...”

Thus, Rishe found herself face-to-face with Arnold in their shared room. They’d made up after their fight just this evening, but right now, Arnold looked harsher than he had at any point in their fight.

“Well, I’m glad you understand that you’ve done something wrong, but I think this situation calls for a more severe response. I know that a simple reprimand is unlikely to be effective.” Arnold’s stern expression softened as he cupped his chin and asked, “So, how would you like to be punished?”

“Huh?” Rishe blinked, thinking she’d misheard. “I-I’m picking?!”

“That’s right. I want you to tell me what punishment I can serve that would affect you the most.”

Finally, Rishe understood that Arnold wanted her to decide her own fate. She had some doubts about this method, but since he'd asked her, she felt she should consider the question carefully and give him a genuine answer. Rishe gave it some thought, then voiced the thing that made her suffer most of all.

"When you..."

"When I...?"

Rishe hung her head but peered hesitantly through her lashes at Arnold. "When you come close to me and touch me, I get so embarrassed, I feel like I'm going to die..."

"..."

Her heart had been acting up for some time now. If Arnold was near her for too long, she felt agonized, like she was going to cry. As soon as she said the words, Rishe wished she could take them back—but yet again, it was too late.

Arnold frowned and sighed, then stood from the couch. When he sat back down, it was on the other couch, next to Rishe. He peered at her with a somewhat sullen look in his eyes. That look was all it took for Rishe's cheeks to burn up.

"Erm, I'm sorry! Forget that! I'll think of something else! I'll come up with something else, okay?!"

"I don't think so. You're proving right now that this method will be very effective."

"Ugh!"

She tried to pull back, but Arnold wouldn't let her. In fact, he took her chin and made her face him, gentle but assertive. His cold expression made his face look like it belonged on a statue, unreal in its beauty.

"How did you draw him out?" he asked. So, he'd guessed that Rishe had lured Raul out in the open rather than Raul initiating the conflict.

"I sensed his presence, so..." Knowing she wouldn't be able to hide what had happened, Rishe came clean. "I observed all the places an archer was likely to hide, then I went into an alley by myself."

"I see."

Rishe's heart drummed even harder at the sound of his low, rumbling voice. She tried to avert her gaze, but he had her head fixed in place. Rishe's eyes met Arnold's blue ones, and she became hopelessly flustered.

"Y-your anger is justified, Your Highness! An attack during my guarding duties has a direct relation to the safety of our international guests. It was something that could have escalated into an international incident—yet I decided not to report it to you, for which I apolo—"

"Rishe."

She flinched when Arnold gently thumbed her lips, parting them somewhat.

"Your Highness..."

Panic rose in her as she remembered the night their lips had sought each other. *He won't kiss me again. I know he won't, but still!*

His dry finger traced her lips. "This is embarrassing for you?"

Rishe nodded hastily, which provoked a satisfied smile from Arnold.

"Then the punishment is working."

"Y-you're so mean!"

Rishe was already holding on by a thread when Arnold took her hand and laced their fingers together.

"You brought this on yourself. I believe I told you that you're under *my* protection." His touch was tender and oddly ticklish, but even that must have been calculated. "So why are you going out of your way to start fights with professional mercenaries?"

"Huh?" Rishe's eyes all but bugged out. *Was I wrong about why he's mad...?*

He must have guessed what she was thinking. "I knew it," Arnold muttered with a sigh. "You seem determined to abandon any thought of your own safety."

Well, I knew it was Raul! she thought, but she couldn't say that.

"You don't listen when I tell you not to do dangerous things. On top of that, you tried to conclude international matters without consulting me, and you suggested I cut ties with you as a potential solution if your actions incurred any consequences for us."

Come to think of it, Arnold had said he would comment on that later. This must have just been the warm-up. Rishe was certain Arnold was about to give her a dressing-down like she was a fresh recruit. She had heard from his Imperial Guards how frightening Arnold's reprimands could be.

I brought this on myself, though. I must endure an equivalent scolding for all the trouble I've caused him!

Rishe steeled herself, but the next words out of Arnold's mouth weren't the ones she'd been expecting.

"If orders and lectures are meaningless to you, then I suppose I must take a different approach, mustn't I?"

"Huh?"

Arnold narrowed his blue eyes and, with a goading grin, whispered, "You said you'd grant me anything I desired, didn't you?"

It was like the floor had given out from under her. Arnold kept his firm but gentle hold on her chin. Given their closeness, Rishe was getting worried once again that he was going to kiss her.

"It's simple, then. I won't order you to stay safe—I'll beg you to, for my sake." Arnold gazed at her, eyes half-lidded. "You'll grant me all my desires, won't you?"

Rishe shuddered at the odd sensuality of his words. "That's not fair!"

"It's very, very fair."

To her, it was the definition of *unfair*. The way he spoke so seductively and then came back with that petulant response left Rishe at a loss for how to respond.

If my heart pounds any harder, His Highness is going to hear it!

And that would be more embarrassment than she could stand. Practically beside herself at this point, Rishe tried to shove Arnold's shoulder away, but that just made him cling tighter.

"Your Highness! Normally you don't beg for things as punishment!"

"...I'll take that into consideration."

I wish you'd do more than that! She was too flustered to verbalize her protest as Arnold started stroking the ring on her finger.

“Ngh!” The sensation of his finger brushing against the skin near the ring was so ticklish, she could cry. “Stop... Wait, Your Highness!”

“No. Sit still for a minute.”

“I’ll sit still! I will! Please, have mercy... Ah!”

She did her best to retreat, but she lost her balance and almost fell. But something more terrible than falling and hitting the floor happened instead. In catching her, Arnold’s body loomed over hers.

His voice was like a throaty purr. “You don’t listen, do you?”

“Ngh!” Rishe clung to Arnold, his low voice reverberating against her eardrum. It was a reflexive reaction on her part, but Arnold took advantage of it to pull her closer.

“I’m never going to choose to cut ties with you.” His lips were almost close enough to kiss Rishe’s ear. Did Arnold even know how bad this was for her heart? Laying Rishe down on the couch, he intoned huskily, “I believe I told you I wouldn’t let you go no matter how much you might hate me for it.”

Something bent and turned dizzily in the back of her head. “Hrk...”

“Rishe.”

Rishe covered her mouth so that she couldn’t say anything she shouldn’t.

“Will you grant me my desire?”

“Mmmh!”

This really was unfair. Rishe had her own objectives. She had to stop Arnold’s war no matter how much danger it might put her in, even if Arnold pushed her away.

But I promised I would become his wife...

There were some promises she couldn’t make precisely *because* she wanted Arnold to be happy.

Perhaps having grown impatient due to Rishe’s stubbornness, Arnold pulled away from her and grabbed her wrists. He tugged her hands away from her mouth, pinned them beside her head, and immobilized her.

Rishe’s chest ached, and she felt she’d cry at any moment. Surely

she was suffering from a lack of oxygen. Her eyes, when they met Arnold's, were wet with tears. He frowned before lowering his lips to hers.

He really was just moments away from kissing her.

Rishe almost squeezed her eyes shut, but she endured the impulse at the last moment. Instead, she locked gazes with Arnold's blue eyes. He was surprised—though there was no telling if it was because Rishe's eyes held a strong will or because he'd noticed her tears.

“Argh!”

Their foreheads collided with a *clunk*. Rishe blinked rapidly, and her eyelashes brushed against Arnold's. His eyes were closed.

Rishe tilted her head to the side. “Your Highness...?”

“I'll let you off the hook with that for now.” Arnold sounded fatigued, though Rishe wasn't sure why. He added, “I can't have my wife dying of embarrassment, after all.”

Rishe's heart rate had slowed, but that final line made it spike once again.

“Ugh! That was close!”

“It was close, eh?”

Arnold released her wrists and reluctantly sat up, and thus Rishe was free. She didn't think the thundering of her heart would slow anytime soon, though.

You really are the most dangerous thing to me, Your Highness!

Arnold didn't know that, though.

Rishe managed to pull herself upright and looked up at the prince. *Even if I do dangerous things, I'll do my best not to die.* Not this time. Arnold would never know about that vow, though.

She hardened her resolve, but when her eyes met Arnold's a moment later, her chest went right back to aching.

Bonus Story:

In Which Raul Asks Rishe If She Likes Arnold's Face

AFTER THE HUBBUB in Vinrhys settled down, all Arnold and Rishe had left to do was prepare to return to the capital.

Having found an opportunity to speak with Rishe without any prying eyes, Raul-dressed-as-Curtis asked her, "Hey, what do you think of your Prince Arnold's face?"

What is this hunter asking me out of the blue? Rishe eyed him with suspicion, but he returned her gaze with complete sincerity.

Arnold and Prince Curtis were supposed to have a meeting this afternoon. Of course, Curtis was a fake and the meeting was just for show, but Rishe planned to attend as well.

When she arrived at the meeting room and ran into Raul, he propped his elbow on the desk before him and rested his chin in his hand. "His Highness does have an attractive face, doesn't he? To another man like me, it's no less impressive than a work of art."

"I think his beauty is obvious to anyone."

It was the prettiest face Rishe had seen in all her seven lives. Arnold's visage was, just as Raul had said, a work of art.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because your eyes wander toward him a lot."

Rishe blinked in alarm. "I-I don't intend to!"

"You also make interesting expressions only when he's nearby."

"Ugh..." Rishe's cheeks were aflame with embarrassment.

"See how red you are? No matter how close to you I get, even if I push you up against a wall, the look on your face never changes."

Well, I got used to Raul being all up in my face from my fifth life.

Back then, Raul was always resting his arms on Rishe's head or mussing up her hair. He would come back in high spirits and hug her, and he spun her around at times too. Though now that she thought back to the beginning of her fifth loop, she didn't recall being particularly

bothered by his proximity before getting used to it either.

“I’m not bad looking myself, am I? But you don’t react at all to me, so I thought maybe Arnold Hein is just special to you.”

“And the conclusion you reached is that I must prefer His Highness’s face?”

“Mm-hmm.” Raul nodded, still looking sincere.

The reason Prince Arnold is special to me...?

Rishe knitted her brow as she considered this.

It’s true that I get excessively embarrassed whenever Prince Arnold’s face is too close to mine. I also feel different when he touches my hand or cheek, or when he trains those blue eyes on me, than when anyone else does those things...

While lost in thought, she heard someone approach the room. The footsteps were familiar to Rishe; they came at a regular interval without deviation. But while she was distracted, Raul smirked.

“Come on, tell me why I can hit on you and you’re unfazed, but that guy says your name and you don’t know what to do with yourself.”

“That’s because...” Rishe frowned again. Then she decided that she would never be able to get away from this hunter, so she marched to the door and pulled it open to reveal a surprised Arnold standing there.

Without saying anything to Arnold, she grabbed his hand and declared to Raul, “I like his face and his voice and the color of his eyes and the shape of his hands and everything else!”

A weighty silence descended on the room after Rishe’s impassioned speech. She didn’t let that deter her.

Pulling Arnold’s hand behind her, Rishe continued pleading her case to Raul. “Prince Arnold’s face is the handsomest in the world, of course, but it’s not *just* his face! If he looked at you with those eyes and called your name with his voice, then anyone would—”

“Rishe.”

She looked up at Arnold and jumped. What she’d just described was really happening. Her gaze fell on her hand, where she was still gripping Arnold’s wrist. Timidly raising her gaze, she found that the most beautiful face in all her seven lives was giving her a stern glare.

Oh...

It was like all her blood had rushed to her cheeks.

What in the world am I saying right in front of him?!

Rishe dropped Arnold's hand like it was on fire and dipped low into a clumsy curtsy. "I-I'm sorry, Prince Arnold! Please pay no mind to what I just said! Forget it immediately!"

"..."

"Arrrrgh!" Rishe's head spun. She lifted her head in Arnold's direction and blurted, "I'm...I'm going to go request some tea for our meeting!"

Before Arnold could reply, Rishe fled the room and raced down the hall.

It's just like Raul said!

Failure wasn't embarrassing to Rishe. She didn't like causing trouble for people, but she considered making mistakes to be a source of inspiration. So why did her face get so hot whenever she made a mistake in front of the prince?

I must go outside to cool down!

Her hands pressed to her cheeks, Rishe scampered toward the courtyard.

Left behind in the room, Raul now found himself the target of Arnold's chilly, quiet gaze.

"...What did you say to her?"

"Eep! You're so scary, Your Highness!"

"..."

"You don't need to worry. I can't win against your wife, so you can lower your guard some."

Raul kept his tone light, but Arnold's expression didn't soften.

Well, it'd be easy enough to explain... Raul shrugged. *But hey, that's not very fun! I think I'll keep quiet. Those two have a solid enough*

relationship that they can take this much teasing.

Unrelenting, he flashed the prince a gleeful grin.

Afterword

TOUKO AMEKAWA HERE. Thank you so much for picking up *7th*

Time Loop Volume 4!

This volume centers around people Rishe interacted with in her fifth life. In this installment, Arnold's open affection for Rishe reaches a five out of ten! This meter doesn't refer to Arnold's feelings for Rishe but rather the *expression* of those feelings, and it rises when Rishe succeeds at cultivating some emotional intelligence in Arnold. I'm sure we'll find out what level his actual feelings are at one of these days...

Wan☆Hachipisu-sensei drew amazing illustrations once again! There were a lot of character designs this time around. And they're all so cute! Thank you so much, really. I look at them every day with a big grin on my face. They grant me vital sustenance.

Thank you as well to my editor! I'm very appreciative of all our back-and-forth email duels. It's fun to lose. I can't win against the vast difference in our knowledge...

Volume 2 of the manga adaptation by Hinoki Kino-sensei is out now, and *that* scene is finally in manga form! When I saw the manuscript, it blew me away. I didn't know what to do with myself! Please check it out!

Thanks to all your kind support, Volume 5 of the novel is on its way. I appreciate it so much! I'll continue to temper my skills and endeavor to create a story my readers can enjoy.

I can't say it enough: Thank you!



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